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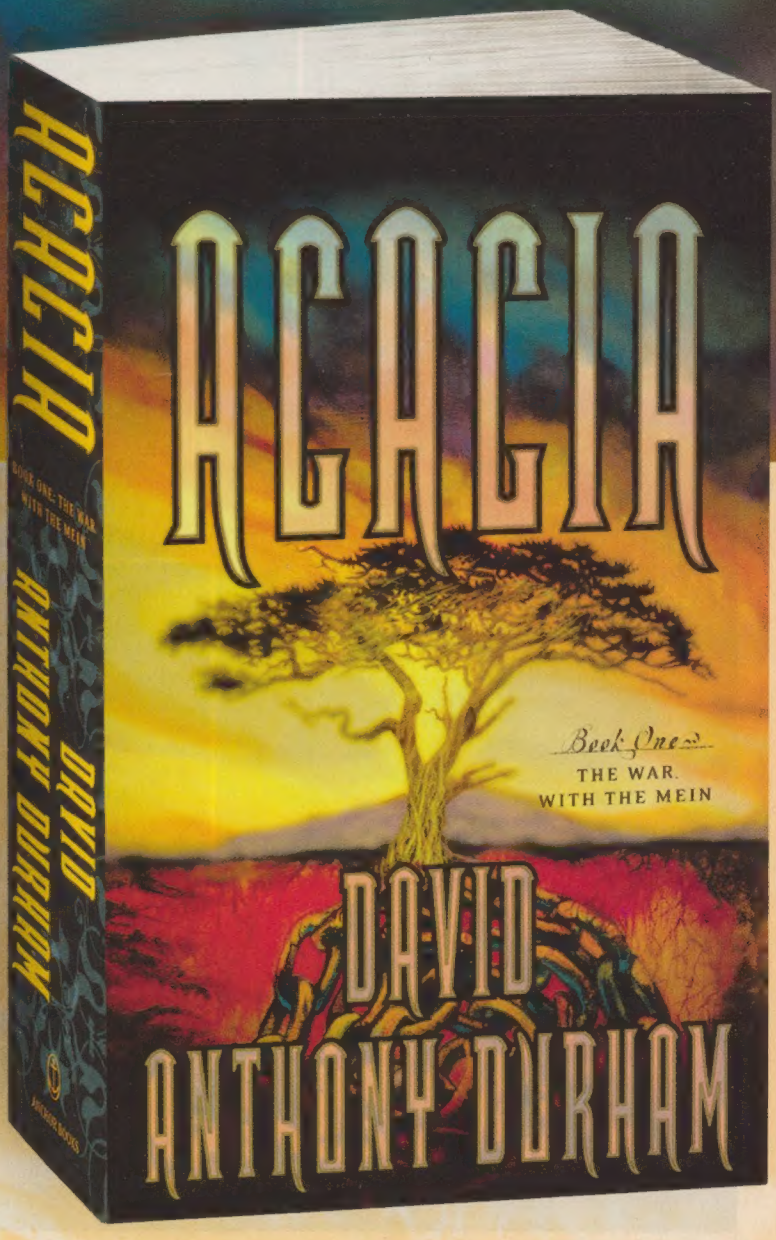

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ABOVE: Cover illustration by Michael Whelan for *Art Inspired by H.P. Lovecraft* from Millipede Press. TOP: Cthulhu by Raymond Bayless. See the review on page 30. *COVER:* Samaranth, the Red Dragon. Illustration by James A. Owen; color art by Lon Saline/The Coppervale Studio. James A. Owen is featured in this issue's Gallery.

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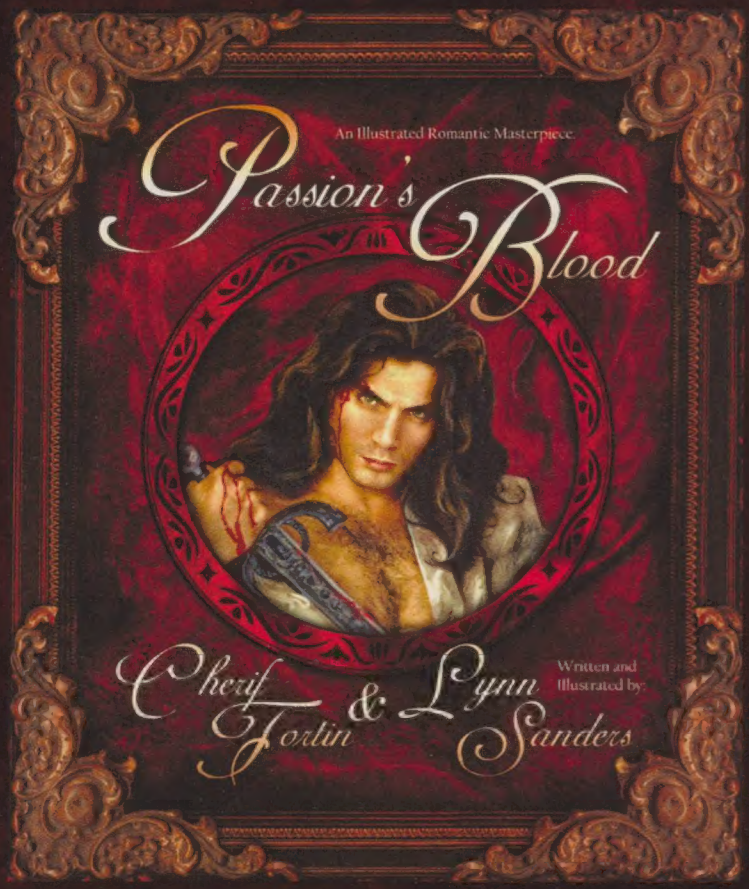

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M.K. HOBSON lives in Oregon with her husband and daughter. Her story "The People's Republic of the Edelweiss Putt-Putt Golf Course" appeared in the February 2008 issue of *Realms of Fantasy*. You can find out more at her website: *www.demimonde.com*.

EUAN HARVEY was raised by wolves in Regent's Park, London. When the last of the Regent's Park pack was trapped and shot during the spring of 1984, Euan was found crouched above the mangled corpse of a park warden, snarling incoherently with his mouth stained with blood. Declared insane, he was confined in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum for a period of ten years. During the first five years of this period, patient rehabilitation and therapy succeeded in teaching Euan language. From then, he learned quickly, devouring books and knowledge as he had once devoured Japanese tourists. Five years later, he escaped from Broadmoor using only a spoon, a three-inch length of string, and a Satsuma. His whereabouts now are unknown.

GREG O. WEATHERFORD has worked for ten years as a journalist and nonfiction essayist but grew up reading DAW Books, Lovecraft, and Tolkien. He lives in Richmond, Virginia, with his wife and two young sons. This is his first published short story.

VYLAR KAFTAN writes science fiction, fantasy, horror, slipstream, and cleverly phrased Post-It notes on the fridge. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons, ChiZine,* and *Clarkesworld,* among other places. She lives in northern California and has a standard-issue tie-dyed T-shirt to prove it. A graduate of Clarion West, she volunteers as a mentor for teenage writers with the online group Absynthe Muse. Her hobbies include modern-day temple dancing and preparing for a major earthquake. She blogs at *www.vylarkaftan.net*.

SHARON MOCK is a graduate of the Viable Paradise workshop in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *Clarkesworld* magazine and *Coyote Wild*. She lives in southern California with her husband.

JOE MURPHY works cause he must but writes cause he has to. He lives with his wife, Veleta, two dogs, and three cats in Fairbanks Alaska. Once upon a time he lived in Quanah, the story's setting. He didn't know Sprokly at the time but got on well with horned toads. Here's his webpage: *www.mosquitonet.com/~jmurphy/*

ERIC WESTBROOK is a professional artist living and working in Washington, DC. He studied fine art and design at the University of Maryland, College Park, and obtained a bachelor's degree in graphic communications. Eric's illustrations are acrylic on canvas, and feature a textural brushstroke technique. His work is regularly awarded inclusion in juried shows of the Illustrators Club of Washington. Eric's fine art paintings have been shown in solo and group shows in and around the Washington, DC. See more of his work at *www.ericwestbrook.com*.

ERIC DINYER is an author/illustrator/photographer who has worked in the entertainment, music, and publishing industries in many ways. His experience includes projects with Time-Warner Books, Columbia Records, Viking Penguin, St. Martin's Press, Doubleday, and Scholastic, as well as in publications such as *Harper's, Newsweek,* and *The New York Times Book Review*. His work has been used in feature films such as *Shaft, Spiderman,* and *Freaky Friday*. Showtime Networks based a thirty-second television spot on eight of Eric's images for their Sci-Fridays series. He has created cover images for Bruce Springsteen and Sting. He holds a B.F.A. from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and an M.F.A from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, New York.

RESA NELSON is a Clarion graduate and has sold short fiction to *Science Fiction Age, Fantasy Magazine, Brutarian Quarterly, Oceans of the Mind, Paradox,* and several other magazines and anthologies. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword,* is slated for publication in late 2008 by Mundania Press. *The Dragonslayer's Sword* is based on her short story by the same name, originally published in *Science Fiction Age* and voted second in that magazine's first Top Ten Readers Poll. Visit her website at *http://resanelson.com*.

JEFF VANDERMEER grew up in the Fiji Islands and spent six months traveling through Asia, Africa, and Europe before returning to the United States. These travels have deeply influenced his fiction. VanderMeer's book-length fiction has been translated into 15 languages, while his short fiction has appeared in several year's best anthologies and short-listed for Best American Short Stories. A two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, VanderMeer has also been a finalist for the Hugo Award, the Philip K. Dick Award, the International Horror Guild Award, the British Fantasy Award, the Bram Stoker Award, and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. His most recent books have made the year's best lists of *Publishers Weekly, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Los Angeles Weekly, Publishers' News,* and Amazon.com. VanderMeer has edited or co-edited several anthologies, including the critically acclaimed *Leviathan* series, *Best American Fantasy,* and *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*. He also writes for *The Washington Post Book World, Publishers Weekly, SF Weekly, Bookslut, The SF Site, Locus Online,* and many others. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife, Ann, and three cats.

PAUL WITCOVER was born in Zurich, Switzerland, in what is now a mental institution. He was the first infant to fly from Paris to New York aboard a commercial jetliner. He currently lives in New York City, where he works as a freelance editor and writer. His first novel, *Waking Beauty,* was chosen by *Locus* as one of the outstanding first novels of 1997. His second novel, *Tumbling After,* was published by HarperCollins in January 2005. In 2006 Dark Horse Press published his third novel, *Dracula: Asylum,* a "semi-sequel" to the Tod Browning film starring Bela Logosi.

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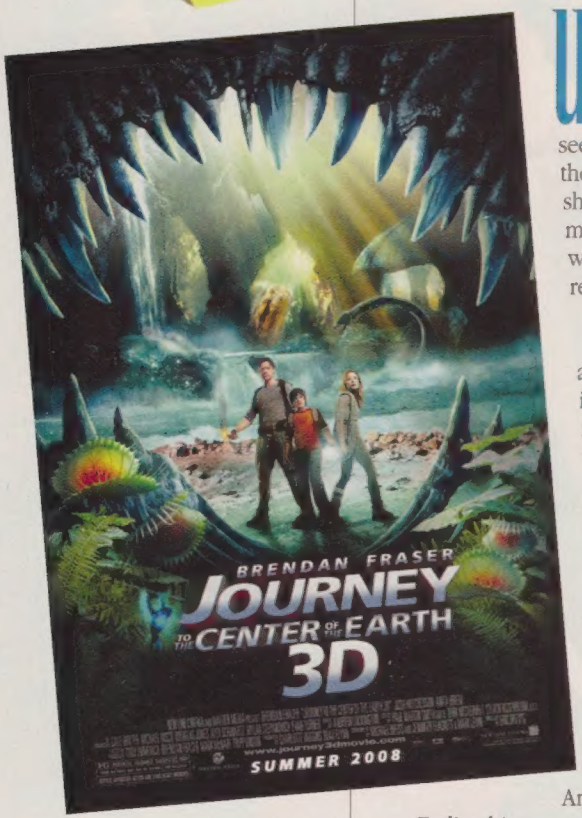
By Resa Nelson

3-D movies take a giant leap forward in an attempt to revive the industry.



From 1952's Bwana Devil *to the much-anticipated* Avatar, *3-D movies have had a long history and are now taking giant technical leaps into a theater near you.*

Until now, 3-D movies have been little more than novelties. Maybe you've seen IMAX movies in which three-dimensional dinosaurs seem to charge off the screen and into the audience. Or maybe you've seen short 3-D films at amusement parks or museums. If you think you know what to expect in a 3-D movie, get ready to think again.

A new day is dawning.

James Cameron (*Titanic*, the *Terminator* movies) is currently at work on *Avatar*, a science fiction film about Earth's contact with inhabitants on another planet. *Avatar* is one of the most highly anticipated movies of this decade: it's tentatively scheduled for release in December 2009. *Avatar* is part of a new wave of 3-D movies that have the potential to generate the same kind of revolution that happened in 1927 when *The Jazz Singer* dazzled audiences as the first "talkie." Previously, 3-D movies were all about making images jump off the screen at the audience. But today's filmmakers are poised to do the opposite: 3-D movies represent taking one giant step closer to virtual reality. In other words, watching a modern-day 3-D movie feels like stepping into the story and sensing it unfold around you.

You may have seen *Journey to the Center of the Earth* this summer or last year's *Beowulf* in 3-D. About 20 more 3-D films are scheduled for production and will be released during the next few years. Director Eric Brevig (*Journey to the Center of the Earth 3-D*) expects all upcoming animated movies from DreamWorks, Pixar, and Disney to be made in 3-D. He estimates there are currently 1,000 to 1,500 movie theaters in the United States that are equipped to screen 3-D films. And that number is likely to grow.

Earlier this year, producer Craig Perry was in New Orleans, where *Final Destination 4* was being filmed in 3-D (expect a release date sometime next year). A few years ago when *Final Destination 3* was in the works, its filmmakers considered shooting it in 3-D. However, even though the technology had come up to speed, not many theaters at that time were able to exhibit 3-D movies. "The 3-D technology and the screens started to catch up with each other," Perry says. "We started to come to this nexus where it would make sense for us to do *Final Destination 4* in 3-D."

Three-dimensional images date back to the mid- to late 1800s. In the early days of filmmaking, this is how it worked: one camera had two lenses that were spaced the same distance apart as the average pair of human eyes. This meant one camera was loaded with two separate films and shot two slightly different versions of the same image at the same time. When projected onto a screen, the images in

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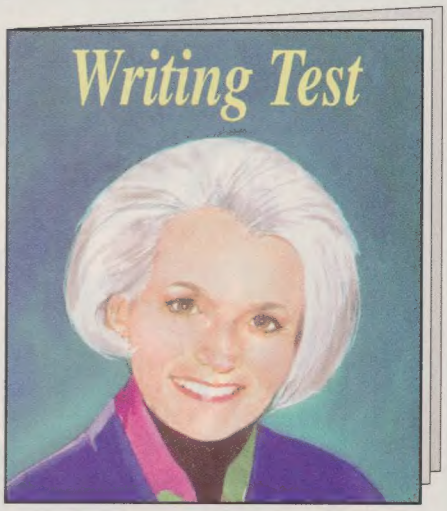

Karen O'Connor, one of Breaking into Print's Writer-instructors, has written hundreds of Articles for national magazines and more than 50 books, two of which are Squeeze the Moment *(Regal Books, 2006) and* The Beauty of Aging *(Regal Books, 2006).*

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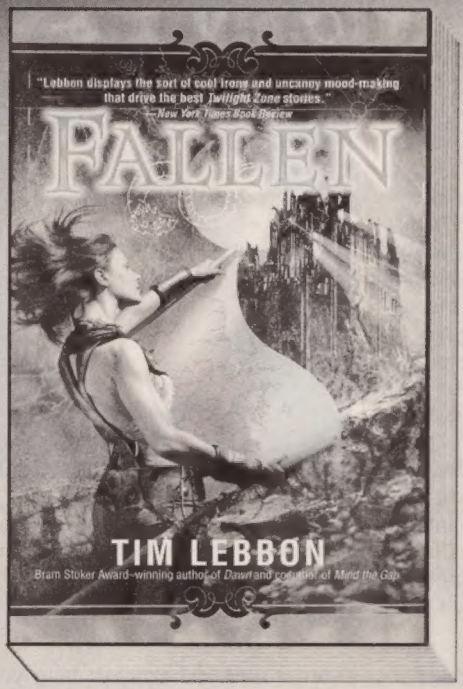
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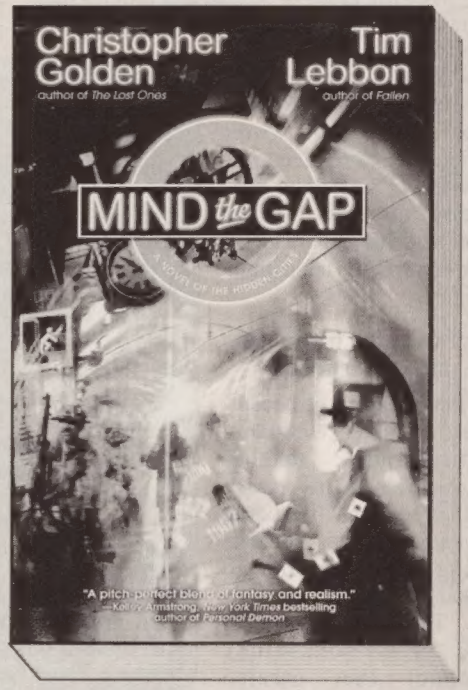
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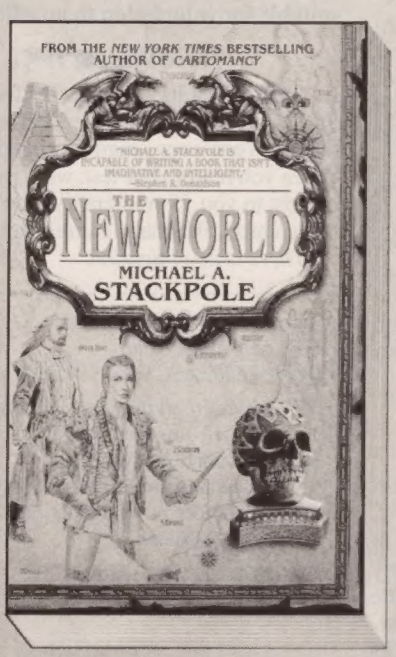

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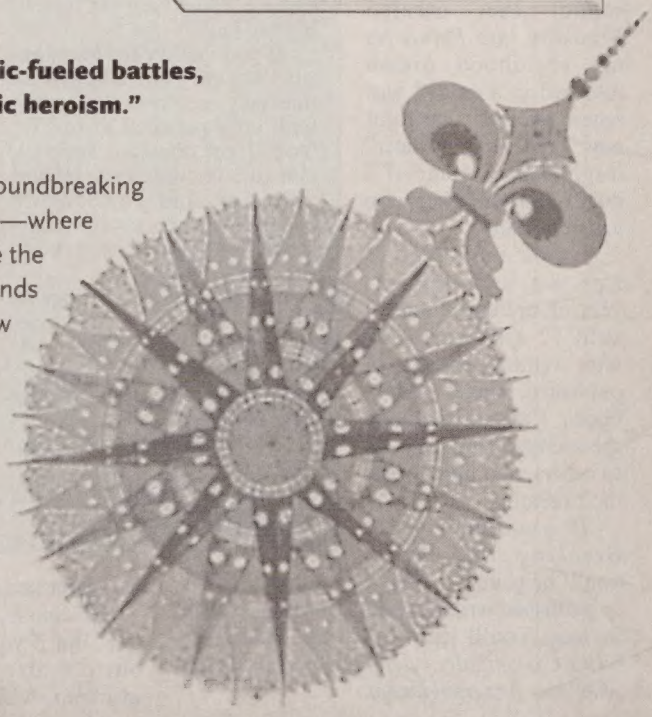

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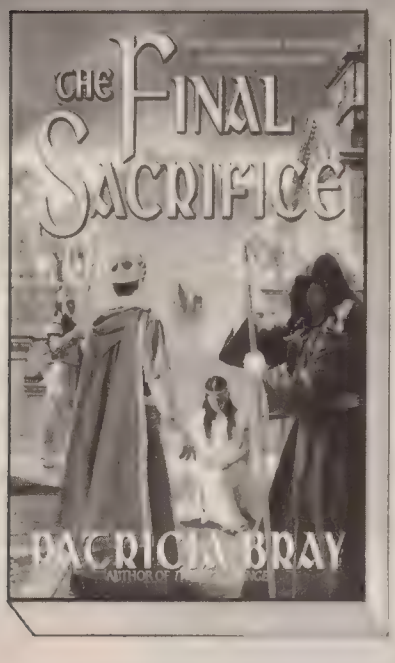

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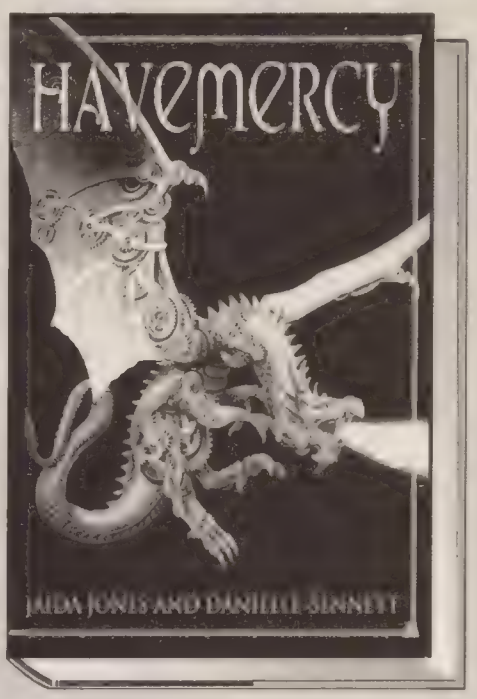

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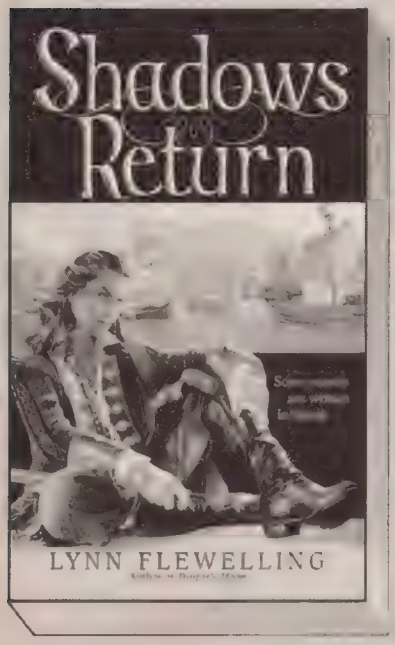

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"A charming and mannered fantasy confection with a darker core of Gothic romance wrapped around a mystery." —Robin Hobb

Genteel but impoverished, the eldest daughter of three goes in search of salvation for both her magician father and her land.

these two separate films were superimposed on each other. However, the film shot through one camera lens was projected through a red filter and the film shot through the other lens was projected through a green filter. To get the 3-D effect, audiences wore cardboard glasses: one lens was red and the other was blue. Audiences saw the projected red images through the blue lens and the blue images through the red lens. When this happens, the brain interprets what the eyes see as a three-dimensional object.

In the 1930s, polarized filters and lenses made it possible to see color images in 3-D. But 3-D short films were still considered to be the stuff of fairgrounds and special exhibits, in the same league with cotton candy and funnel cakes. Even though a few 3-D features were screened in movie theaters, they were treated as little more than a fad.

That changed when several 3-D short films were shown and well received at the Festival of Britain in 1951. Hollywood finally took notice because filmmakers were looking for answers to a serious problem.

In the years following the end of World War II, going to the movies fell out of fashion. Movies had provided a great escape for civilians during the war years, and many people fell into a weekly habit of going out to see movies. When U.S. soldiers came home, the new rage was to get married, stay at home, raise a family, and watch TV. Hollywood executives panicked as movie attendance figures plummeted. The blacklisting of Hollywood during the McCarthy era didn't help. Neither did the Golden Age of television, when the best entertainment was as close as your own living room. Folks in the film industry wracked their brains for ideas that would coax people out of the comfort of their own homes and back into theaters.

Hollywood opted to take a chance on technology. After all, despite a few tweaks here and there, movie technology had changed very little in 20 years. It was time to try something new. One independent filmmaker took a chance. His 1952 movie, *Bwana Devil*, was shown in 3-D and color. (Its story is based on true events: in the late 1800s, lions killed 140 railway workers in Kenya. These same events inspired the 1996 film, *The Ghost and the Darkness* starring Val Kilmer and Michael Douglas.) When audiences saw 3-D images of spears that seemed to be flung toward them, they screamed. *Bwana Devil* was a hit. Its success proved that 3-D movies could draw crowds and boost box office returns. Hollywood studios scrambled to take advantage of 3-D technology.

During the next three years, 37 3-D movies were released, including *House of Wax* (Vincent Price), *It Came From Outer Space, Creature From the Black Lagoon, Kiss Me Kate* (Howard Keel and Kathryn Grayson), *Hondo* (John Wayne), and Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder* (Grace Kelly and Ray Milland). However, by 1956 the interest in 3-D films had withered and died. Instead of being an event that drew audiences into theaters, 3-D movies returned to their long-standing status as oddities.

So what happened? Why did 3-D movies fail in the 1950s?

One reason is that audiences complained about having to wear the cardboard glasses that allowed them to experience the three-dimensional effects. Even worse, many people experienced eyestrain, some of which was caused by poor projection and damaged prints. Another factor was greed: because 3-D films require two different copies of the same movie (one filmed for the location of the right eye and one for the location of the left eye), the studios that distributed 3-D movies decided to double their fees, which meant the theaters doubled the cost of tickets. Some sources report that audiences complained that the 3-D movies were "lousy," but it's more likely they expected a 3-D movie to be twice as good as a "regular" movie. After all, in the 1950s, audiences paid

twice the price to see a 3-D movie.

Which leads to this question: with a slew of 3-D movies on today's horizon, what's going to prevent the same 1950s boom-and-bust cycle from happening again? After all, there are similar historical parallels that led Hollywood to believe 3-D technology could be the answer to their prayers both then and now. In the early 1950s, the Golden Age of television kept audiences at home. Today, the video-game generation claims that games outshine movies in the same way that TV shows were once superior. During the past several years, there's been a sharp decline in theater attendance. Once again, Hollywood has been scrambling to figure out how to solve this problem. And, once again, they're turning to 3-D technology. But has anything really changed?

Brevig may be the best person to answer that question. He's recognized as one of the most experienced filmmakers in the realm of 3-D. You may have already seen his work. "I'm one of the few people who has worked on stereo 3-D movies in the past," Brevig says. "I worked on three of the Disneyland theme park 3-D films over the past couple of decades. *Captain EO* is probably the most famous. There's one called *Honey, I Shrunk the Audience* and one that started when Epcot opened, called *Magic Journeys.* These were all really well received, but in those days, you could only show those sorts of 3-D experiences in a specialized theme park environment. It's only been in the last year or two that digital projection in regular movie theaters has allowed it to be a reality in any theater with the equipment."

As a veteran filmmaker for theme parks, Brevig was well aware that no one had ever solved the problem of the eyestrain that has always gone hand-in-hand with 3-D movies. He knew that audiences complained of headaches after watching short 3-D films. He needed to make a feature film that wouldn't make them reach for a bottle of aspirin.

Brevig set out to solve the problem by studying it. Eventually, he isolated the cause. When he learned why 3-D movies cause eyestrain, he discovered a solution that simply boiled down to developing new rules for camera work. "I told my camera crew, 'Here's how we're going to do it.' Everybody was amazed—even people who have worked in 3-D for a long time—that when we saw our dailies. there was no eyestrain at all. You can put up with almost anything in a short theme-park film, which is maybe 15 minutes. But a feature film is 90 minutes long. That's a very serious concern." Brevig has eliminated that concern. Thanks to his new techniques for filming 3-D movies, it doesn't hurt to watch them.

Another complaint by 1950s audiences was the oh-so-uncool cardboard glasses. Perry believes that complaint is passé. "My expectation is that within the next two or three years, they'll sell them in retail," Perry says. "Everyone will have their own pair of 3-D glasses that they take to the theater because 3-D will have made such a penetration into the marketplace.

"Let's be honest. *Avatar* is driving the marketplace right now, which is a year from this Christmas. Everybody wants to be ready for that because that's going to be one of the biggest 'event' movies you've ever seen. It's Jim Cameron's return after 12 years." (Although Cameron has worked on a couple of documentaries and TV series during the past decade, his last feature film was *Titanic* in 1997.)

If Perry is right and *Avatar* becomes a blockbuster, it might pave the way for 3-D movies to shake up the movie industry itself, similar to the way *The Jazz Singer* paved the way for talkies. By today's standards, *The Jazz Singer* is insensitive at best and racist at worst, mostly because Al Jolsen wore blackface makeup in some musical numbers. The movie is about a cantor's son who rejects the opportunity to follow in his father's traditional footsteps and becomes a vaudeville performer instead. This story of a cantor's son assimilating into American culture was something with which the 1920s audience could easily identify and embrace. In other words, it wasn't just the novelty of adding sound to moving pictures that made "talkies" succeed. It was the fact that the first talkie—

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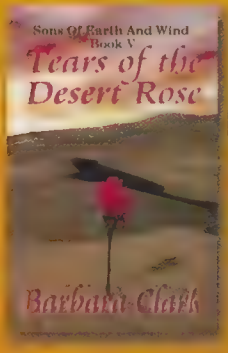

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The Jazz Singer—was a hit.

What if the same thing happens with *Avatar*? What if audiences embrace *Avatar* and therefore embrace 3-D technology?

Brevig points out that it isn't just the audience's response that could spark a revolution in the movie industry. Shooting a 3-D movie using modern technology is more efficient and therefore less expensive than ever before. "The thing that was the most remarkable that I've noticed—and this actually occurred on *Journey*—was the process of filming a movie using digital capture," Brevig says. "We recorded on high definition videotape: one for right eye, one for left eye. What that meant was that while onstage filming, I literally had the ability to play back instantly what I had just shot in a theater in full color, sound, and 3-D. I did that twice a day: at lunch and after shooting at the end of the day. I could review my dailies within minutes of having photographed them. This allowed me to work incredibly quickly in terms of striking the set that I had just finished, as opposed to the 'film' days where you shoot, the film goes to the lab—in our case, we were shooting in a distant location—the lab sends you a negative report the next day and maybe two days later you get to see what you shot. I could see instantly, within 30 seconds of having shot."

Brevig also set up an area on set where visitors could wear 3-D glasses and watch each scene in real time. "The studios didn't quite understand. Because it was 3-D and all of the technology was new, I don't think they grasped what a benefit that was in terms of efficiency and cost savings. I think they were more dazzled by the fact that you put on glasses and get a 3-D image live while it was being shot. But after the novelty of it wears off, I think everyone will realize that it is the way to be efficient."

Studios and audiences alike have a learning curve to navigate. The biggest problem with 3-D is that nasty label: "novelty." With all the advances made in technology, 3-D has become less of a gimmick and more of a way to immerse audiences into the movie itself.

Perry says, "We're looking at that dynamic of 3-D capture as a storytelling tool. Most of what we want to express is depth and dimension and the sense that there is a world behind the screen that you can really find yourself immersed in. And the more we've applied that aesthetic, the more we've realized it's the right way to go because you become completely enamored in the 3-D experience without being reminded at every turn."

On the set of *Final Destination 4*, the filmmakers screened a few scenes in 3-D for journalists. While the 3-D glasses they provided weren't exactly hip, they were a big step up from the red-and-blue-lens cardboard glasses of the past or even the bug-eye polarized glasses handed out in today's theme park 3-D theaters.

Watching a 3-D movie is like stepping into another dimension. When a few characters stand in a circle and talk, it's easy to feel like you're right there with them. Everything on the screen comes to life in a very real way. It's not exactly virtual reality. But it's a lot closer than anything seen before now. And just as filmmakers promise, there's no eyestrain and it's easy to forget you're wearing 3-D glasses.

Perry speculates about the possibilities for 3-D films. "I do see how cool it is and how it can be used as a storytelling tool in a way that isn't gimmicky but just immersive. I think you can do a comedy in 3-D. I think you can do a drama in 3-D. I think a drama in 3-D would be staggering, because you couldn't distance yourself from what people are feeling—you would actually be right there in the moment. And it would make any actor worth his salt deliver his aria in a way that would rip your heart out. So I'm very curious to see how they apply the technology, which is why Katzenberg and Spielberg and all these people are saying, 'Look, this is just another tool in the

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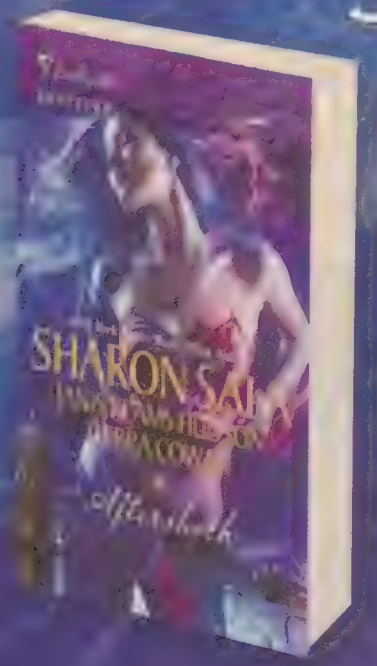

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toolbox.' And yet it's the sort of tool that can reinvent every particular genre if people are willing to spend the capital to capture it that way, because it is not cheap.

"The challenge is going to be to continue to make 3-D films special so that each demographic gets what they want out of the 3-D experience. For a family movie, you go see a Disney movie, and the movie's delicious and the CG is fabulous. For a horror fan, they get a real hot blast of horror with some action and stunts and laughs. And then I think subsequent movies that they start to apply 3-D to will also service the audiences that they're intended for in ways that make movie-going fresh again. 3-D will allow people to enjoy going back to the movies and not having them be stuck at home.

"Imagine you have HD 3-D Jumbotron broadcasts of pay-per-view fights. Or a concert. You really don't feel like you're missing anything, because you're there in 3-D. Imagine if you go down to the House of Blues to see a broadcast concert, and it's a 3-D concert. They did the NBA All-Star game like that, and it played like gangbusters. Can you imagine if you're a musician? I could go on concert tour in one fell swoop and make $400 million in one night. The overhead is so minimized because you don't have to take the road show on the road." Perry pauses and smiles. "But that's just me being a crass commercial whore."

Perry says that Japanese companies are currently at work on technology for viewing 3-D movies on TV sets, although he suspects that 3-D home viewing probably won't be available for another four or five years at best. He also thinks it will defeat the purpose of showing 3-D films and broadcasts in theaters and other large venues.

"To me, it will make things special again," Perry says. "It'll make the experience communal. Can you imagine never missing a concert because you can go and see it and feel like you're really there and have 10,000 people feel like they're all sharing the same experience?"

Whether 3-D technology can succeed half a century after it amounted to little more than a flash in the pan remains to be seen. But for anyone who wants to experience stepping into a movie, it's worth getting off the sofa and going out to the theater.

And if 3-D really does catch on, imagine what it will feel like to step into the worlds of fantasy and horror films. ❧

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By Paul Witcover and Jeff VanderMeer

Daniel Abraham's *An Autumn War* proves that tragedy is the stuff of superior art.

Tolkien, in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," wrote about the consolation offered by fantastic tales, and especially by the happy endings of such tales, which he described in terms redolent of his Christian faith as the experience of a "miraculous grace." I don't believe that a happy ending is required for a fantasy novel, or any work of art, to bestow its consolatory gift of making bearable the way of all flesh; nor do I think Tolkien was arguing for anything so simplistic. Tragedy, too, has its powers of consolation, as the ending to *Lord of the Rings* itself demonstrates.

So let's look at a fantasy that primarily sets out to deliver consolation instead of escape, and which does so through tragedy: the third volume of Daniel Abraham's Long Price Quartet, ***An Autumn War*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 368 pp. $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-1342-3).

Readers of this column will recall my high praise for the first two installments of Abraham's remarkable series, *A Shadow in Summer* and *A Betrayal in Winter,* in which he set out a world in which magic is accessed through a form of poetry that binds metaphors into humanlike form and harnesses their powers in a perpetual contest of wills between the binding poet and the bound metaphor, or andat. Those novels, set many years apart, introduced the recurring characters of the series: Otah, ruler of the city of Machi, one of the city-states that comprises the realm of the Khaiem, which alone possesses the secret of binding the andat; Cehmai, the poet of Machi, who controls the andat Stone-Made-Soft; Maati, Otah's old friend and enemy, a failed poet who now serves as Machi's librarian; Kiyan, Maati's wife; and Liat, a woman who once loved Maati and Otah.

This is just a small sampling of the fantastic work featured in Artists Inspired by H.P. Lovecraft *from Millipede Press. TOP: (l to r) Raymond Bayless, John Holmes, John Jude Palencar, Holmes. BOTTOM: (l to r) Michael Whelan, Whelan, J.K. Potter.*

Exclusive possession of the andat has allowed the cities of the Khaiem to fall into a comfortable, somewhat decadent complacency, confident that the awesome power of their dangerous slaves can shield them from the ambitions of the neighboring Galt empire. But now a Galt general, Balasar Gice, has devised a plan to strip the Khaiem of andat, leaving them with no means to defend themselves. Gice is a monomaniac determined to rid the world of the apocalyptic potential of the andat, and it is very much to Abraham's credit that he comes across as a charismatic figure whose goals and methods even the most magic-besotted reader is likely to sympathize with to some degree. The andat Stone-Made-Soft,

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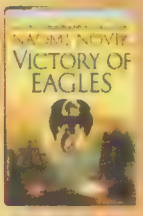

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GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

BY JEFF VANDERMEER

The Amazing Remarkable Monsieur Leotard, Eddie Campbell and Dan Best, First Second, New York, trade paperback, 127 pp., $16.95, ISBN: 978-1-59643-301-4. Light of touch, told in what look like watercolors, this new work from the prolific Campbell relates the incredible adventures of the little-known nephew of the great Leotard (who, in a typical Campbellian touch, dies on page 12). From talking, waistcoat-wearing bears to an episode on the *Titanic*, the episodic story stays on its toes, even when relating the most brutal of events—such as the slaughter of the Calabrian Fighting Midgets by a huge liger. It's impressive that Campbell's depiction of this sad event can have a certain weight while the art style still manages to be fluid and soft in less devastating episodes. All of the single-page panels are nothing short of remarkable, in fact, managing to be both familiar and grotesque.

Out of Picture 2: Art from the Outside Looking In, Jim Munroe and Salgood Sam, Villard, New York, NY, oversized trade paper, pp. 240, $26.00, ISBN: 978-0-345-49873-1. Wild

visions of huge flying fish. Clever prat-falling crocodiles. Lovely black-and-white scribbled illustrations of fuzzy monsters with beak-snouts. In all ways visual, *Out of Picture 2* is a delight, any story somewhat incidental. The series takes its name from a film term used when a character, scene, or shot is cut from a movie—meaning that these books "represent a safe haven for stories and visions that have yet to be realized." The artists include Peter Nguyen, David Gordon, Benoit le Pennec, Tsutsumi, and seven others. As a sumptuous coffee table book, *Out of Picture 2* should satisfy any collector of upscale comics art.

Rapunzel's Revenge, Shannon and Dean Hale with Nathan Hale, Bloomsbury, New York, hardcover, 144 pp., $18.99, ISBN: 978-1-59990-070-4. Raucous, forceful, and funny, the transplanting of Rapunzel to the Old West. In this radical retelling, Rapunzel lives in a luxurious castle/mansion only to find out that her real mother is slaving away in mining camps outside of its walls. For the crime of straying beyond the walls, she is sent to live in a huge tree in a swamp, where she grows out her famous hair. When it's long enough, she escapes, and after encounters with wild pigs comes upon a cowboy, and a landscape similar to the American West. Well, somewhat similar. I don't remember anything about snakes as large as dragons in any of the history books from school. Nor do I remember magical vines or "wanted" posters with Rapunzel's face on them. Goofy as the concept might be, the execution, in the strong, bold, full-color art and the characterization of this version of Rapunzel, really works. It's all great fun, and should appeal to both kids and adults.

Dungeon: Monstres, Vol. 1, The Crying Giant, Joann Sfar, Lewis Trondheim, Mazan, Jean-Christophe Menu, Nantier Beall Minoustchine Publishing, New York, NY, trade paperback, 120 pp., $14.95, 978-1-56163-525-2. Anyone who has read this column knows how much I love the *Dungeon* series. This latest volume contains two stories by guest artists, which may diminish the appeal, especially since the beloved characters of previous volumes only have cameos. The first is entitled "John-John the Terror" and concerns an inn full of monsters and a bird-adventurer who finds and exploits them. In the title story, "The Crying Giant," the stolen giant's eye that allows the Dungeon keepers to see far distances (like a crystal ball) is weeping, because the giant it belongs to is having a crisis of unrequited love. The art for "John-John the Terror" is wonderful, while the plot for "The Crying Giant" is more intricate Throughout, there is a little less of the trademark wit that marks a Sfar-Trondheim collaboration. Still, both stories are well above average in terms of fantasy comics.

Doctor Grordbort's Contrapulatronic Dingus Directory, Dark Horse Comics, Greg Broadmore, New York, hardcover, 32 pp., $12.95, ISBN: 978-1-59307-876-8. Insane creations such as the Ignas Fraunhoffer III Gas Driven Gadabout and Dr. Grordbort's Highly Popular Portable Inertionaut are normal for this wacky and beautiful compendium of steampunk gadgetry, much of it gun-related. Such never-happeneds as the Neverite Portable Massmotron come complete with textual descriptions, like "At last a portable Massmotron, you may well say to yourself as you read this." Yes, I was thinking that! Such mind-readers. Apparently, the author also knew I'd enjoy Moonhater Deathrays, Dinglington Regulators, and Victorious Mongoose Concealable Ray Pistols. But that's not all! In the last section, Lord Cockswain's Marvelous Interplanetary Excursions includes encounters with Martian and Venusian aliens by intrepid British-style explorers. Er, armed with death-wielding ray guns. ❧

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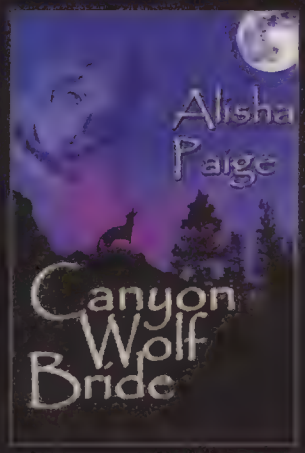

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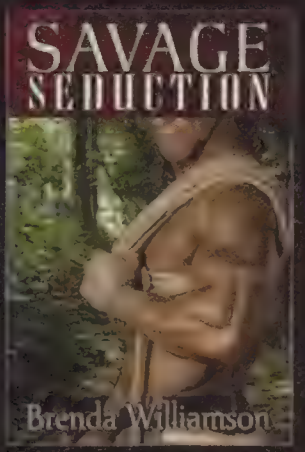

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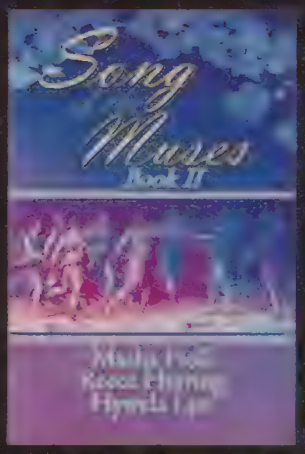

Song Of The Muses - Book II
Authors: Masha Holl, Reece Herring, Hywela Lyn
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for instance, is employed to facilitate mining, but the military uses of its power—to liquefy and then resolidify rock and stone: any rock and stone, anywhere ... or all of it, everywhere—are horrible to contemplate, and it's understandable how someone might seek to rid the world of andat simply to prevent the monstrous misuse of their power.

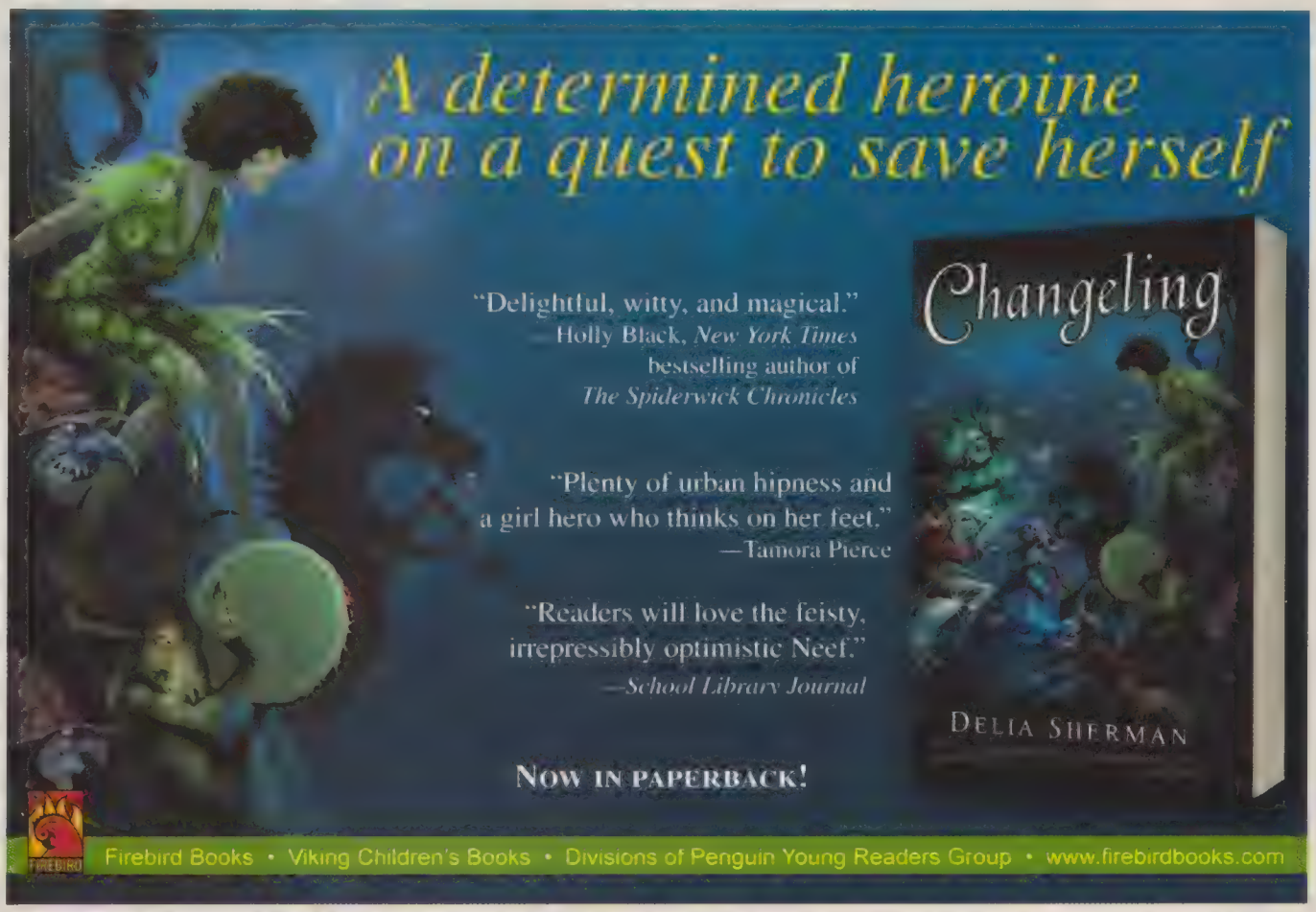
Normally the binding of an andat requires years of painstaking study and formulation, for a failed binding means the death of the poet attempting it, as well as rendering that particular andat more difficult to "capture" again in the future. But Gice's scheme impels Otah and Maati, who has been researching the binding process and believes he has found a way to shield the poet from the fatal consequences of a failed binding, to gamble the fate of the Khaiem on a very risky throw of the dice.

The personal history linking Otah, Maati, and Liat comes to the fore as the appearance of Liat's son throws the delicately balanced political structure of the Machi court, in which sons are of paramount importance, into turmoil; the presence of the past—or what Freud called "the return of the repressed"—plays a major thematic role in *An Autumn War*. I had been curious, after reading and enjoying the first two books, why the quartet as a whole was called the *Long Price*. This book answers that question in spades, as Abraham deftly interweaves the personal histories of his characters with the longer histories of their respective countries, to show how every decision comes with a cost, and the longer the payment of that price is delayed, the greater the interest added to it. I won't give the ending away, but it's a powerfully dark conclusion whose tragic implications spread outward across the world in an instantaneous, devastating judgment. Can there be consolation in the face of such disaster? Thanks to the dignity with which Abraham invests his characters, and the exquisite sensibility with which he details their inner states of mind and emotion, their tragedy offers us the kind of catharsis that marks a superior work of art. I was deeply moved by Abraham's grim yet far from hopeless tale, whose conclusion in the forthcoming *The Price of Spring* I await with impatience.

Steampunk may have begun in science fiction, but it's long since crossed over into fantasy, where it has found a soil better suited to its flowering, as witness such diverse masterworks as Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* and Felix Gilman's *Thunderer*. That doesn't mean every steampunk fantasy is a masterpiece, however. Stephen Hunt's second novel, ***The Court of the Air*** (Tor, New York, hardcover, 592 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-2042-1), certainly isn't. It's a sloppy, jury-rigged contraption that wears its literary influences—Moorcock and Miéville, mainly—on its sleeve, barrels along at speeds far too great for its slapdash construction, and finally comes spectacularly apart. But it's one hell of a train wreck, and for the first 200 pages, when you think that Hunt may just have what it takes to keep his outlandish locomotive on the rails, it's one of the most exhilarating reading experiences I've had this year.

The Court of the Air features a world that resembles 18th-century England and Europe, with a number of departures from the history we know. The most glaring is that magic of a sort exists, in the form of a strange substance called feymist, exposure to which "mutates" human beings in unpredictable ways, conferring superhero-like powers upon them. In England—or Jackals, as it's called here—if the victims are not rendered hideous or recognizably nonhuman by their exposure (in which case they are either hidden away or killed outright), they are given an opportunity to serve the government in the Special Guard, which is led by the Superman-like Captain Flare. The members of the Special Guard have privileges that set them apart from the common herd, but they are also kept on a short leash; they wear hex collars that compel their obedience and loyalty upon pain of hideous death.

Jackals is threatened by the revolutionary "commonshare" government of neighboring Quatérshift (France), which is subjecting its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NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

Generation Dead, by Daniel Waters, Hyperion, May 2008. Ever since dead American teenagers started coming back as zombies (aka the living impaired), society's been in a state of upheaval as people work out the details of their reassimilation, with reactions ranging from loving acceptance of the deceased, to outright fear and loathing. When Phoebe falls for one of her "differently biotic" classmates, she ends up in a bizarre love triangle, and a whole mess of trouble involving the living and the dead. Thought-provoking and introspective, this is easily one of the most interesting books I've read all year, touching upon a host of relevant issues while still delivering a sharp, compelling story. Definitely a don't-miss.

Little Brother, by Cory Doctorow, Tor, April 2008. In the near future, with technology just a little more pervo-

attempt places Marcus and his friends at the site of a horrific ter-

ly, illegally held and questioned.

now under martial law, Marcus swears revenge for his unfair treatment, and begins an underground technological movement aimed at bringing down the people who abused him. He'll find unlikely allies and potential betrayal around every corner as he

malcontents, all dedicated to

examines the role of technology and security and the government in our lives, and makes us reconsider just what we're willing to put

Nobody's Prize, by Esther

is determined to see the world before she settles down at home. To that

her brothers and a host

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Percy Jackson #4: The Battle of the Labyrinth, by Rick

ed Kronos marshals his forces and

series that breathes new life into the

wait for the continuation.

Princess Ben, by Catherine Gilbert Murdock,

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The dead & the gone, b

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citizenry to a Reign of Terror via a guillotine-like device called the Gideon's Collar. Only the Special Guard and the Royal Aerostatical Navy—as well as, ironically, the cursewall, a feymist barrier that the Quatérshiftian sorcerers, or worldsingers, erected to stop its own people from fleeing the country—keep Jackals safe and free ... so far.

Another difference between Jackals and England is that the restoration of the monarchy following the Civil War was purely symbolic, with power remaining exclusively in the hands of Parliament, or the House of Guardians, and each new king kept under perpetual house arrest and, as a condition of assuming the throne, surgically divested of his arms, a witty, grisly notion that is typical of Hunt's twisted imagination.

A third major point of departure is the existence of a race of mechanical beings with intelligence, free will, and souls—the so-called "steammen," who are ruled by an almost mythical machine called King Steam.

Meanwhile, a secret organization watches over Jackals—and much of the rest of the world—from on high: this is the eponymous Court of the Air, an invisible branch of government, possessing superior magic and technology, designed to act as a check on the House of Guardians. And finally, deep beneath the city of Middlesteel (London), the remnants of an ancient empire fueled by the worship of bloodthirsty deities invoked by human sacrifice (based on Aztec mythology) dream of reclaiming their lost glory.

Such is the complicated—overcomplicated, actually—backdrop against which the events of the novel play out. Those events are driven by two murders, each of which impacts the life of a young orphan, a boy and a girl. The former is Oliver Brooks, who is not only suspected of complicity in his uncle's death but considered a prime candidate for the Special Guard due to childhood exposure to feymist, even though no unusual abilities have manifested themselves yet. The latter is Molly Templar, who, like Oliver, is more than what she seems.

Oliver and Molly pursue separate paths, plotlines that run parallel for much of the book before finally intersecting in the pitched battle for Middlesteel that constitutes the novel's climax and pits agents from all of the above-mentioned organizations and interests against each other. The two begin likably enough but never really grow ... as is even more true of supporting characters like Prince Alpheus, the still-armed heir to the throne; Slowstack, a steamman who befriends Molly; and Harry Stave, an agent of the Court of the Air who takes an interest in Oliver. Only two characters amid the multitude clamoring for attention achieve more than a minimal presence: the Whisperer, a horribly misshapen mutant whose mental powers give him access to Oliver's dreams, and Count Vauxtion, a Quatérshiftian aristocrat turned

assassin. It's as if Hunt has no time to spare for character development in his mad race to finish before his eccentric assemblage of allusions to other works and times, pounded together with scant regard for internal cohesion or developmental logic, flies apart at the seams. There is something appealing in this scattershot approach to world-building and novel-writing: it's the appeal of wandering through a junk shop where valuable antiques are found side by side with popcultural artifacts and other curiosities, the flotsam and jetsam of history. But if the construct built from such disparate parts does not hold together—and more, does not display an intrinsic rightness, however bizarre (as in Miéville's work)—then I'm afraid it must be counted a failure, even if, as here, it's an inspired one ... and one very much worth reading.

Greg Keyes is another author whose reach has often exceeded his grasp. Fast off the mark, he has a tendency to fade at the finish. One wonders if this habit has cost him his longtime publisher, Del Rey, because his slim new book, ***The Hounds of Ash and Other Tales of Fool Wolf*** (EDGE, Calgary, trade paperback, 192 pp., $13.95, ISBN: 978-1-894063-09-8), is out from a small Canadian press. Or perhaps Del Rey, like so many big publishers these days, is reluctant to publish collections of short fiction. Yet *Hounds* is not precisely that: it's a sequence of seven linked short stories, previously pub-

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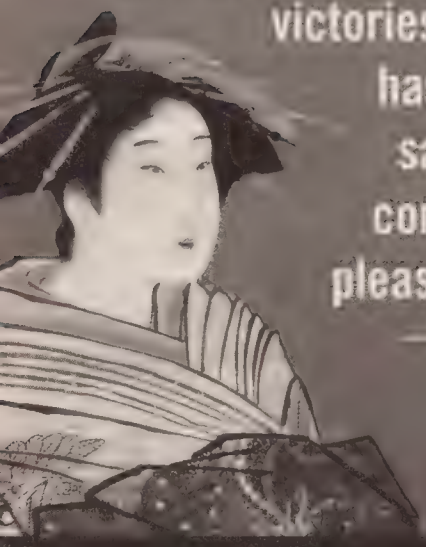

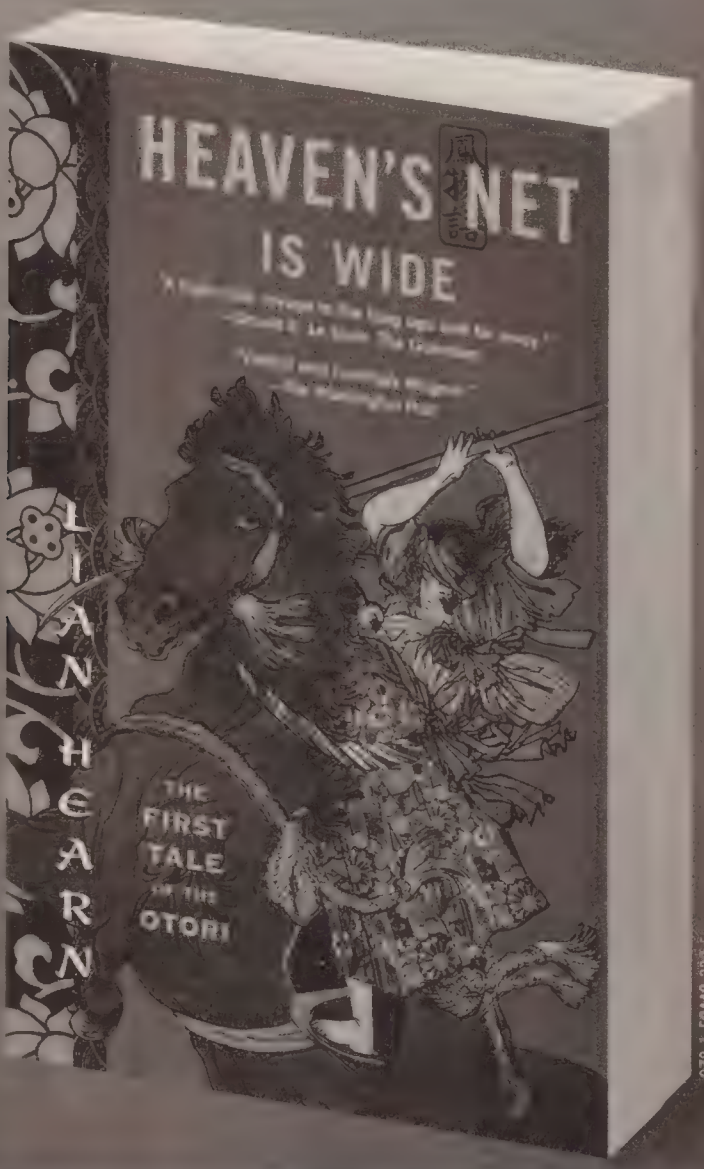

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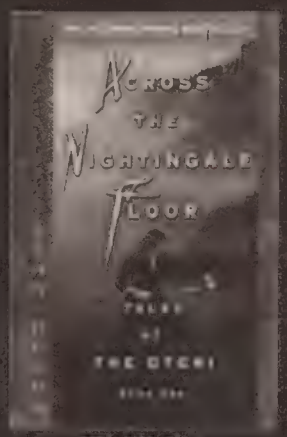

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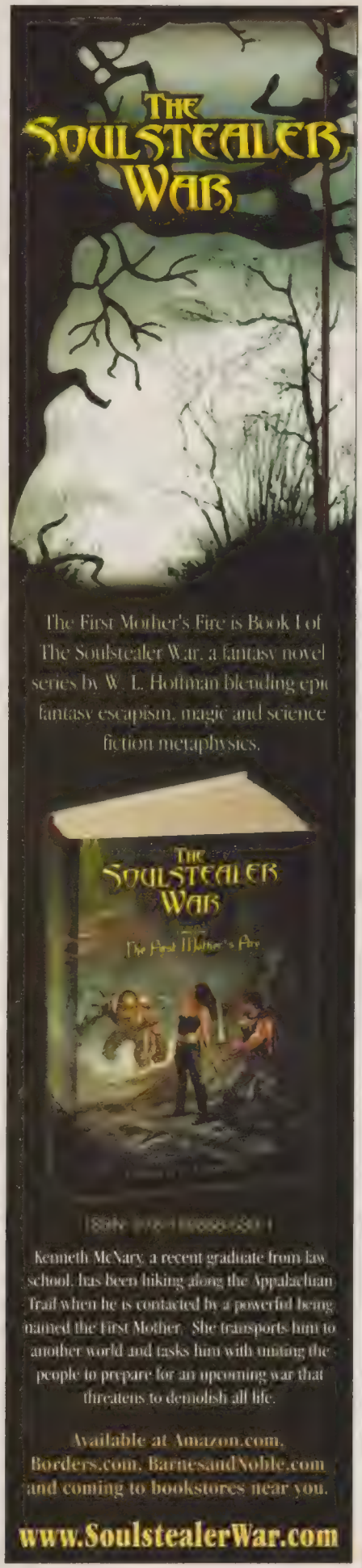
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lished in *Dragon* magazine, each of which stands on its own but also contributes to something larger, something that has the comprehensive feel of a novel without exactly being one. I was hopeful about this format, because it seemed to me that it might prove a better showcase for Keyes's talents than a multivolume epic. And such indeed proved to be the case. This is a sprint, not a marathon, and for once Keyes does not limp across the finish line.

Hounds is set in the god-thronged universe of Keyes's first two novels, *The Waterborn* and *The Black God*, but readers unfamiliar with those books need not hesitate before picking this one up. Story by story, Keyes conveys everything readers need to know with admirable concision and effective dramatic pacing.

Fool Wolf, the main character in these stories, owes much to the Native American trickster archetype. Even his name suggests this influence. He's a reluctant shaman, or gaan, from a tribal people called the Mang, a self-exiled wanderer whose selfish nature does not preclude surprising acts of bravery, nobility, and compassion. He's a cunning schemer whose plans tend to come back and bite him in the ... tail. But Keyes draws even more strongly on another archetype: the brooding, ironic antihero most famously embodied by Michael Moorcock's Elric of Melniboné. Elric's great tragedy, inseparable from his glorious destiny, was to bear the vampiric runesword, Stormbringer. Fool Wolf bears a similarly freighted burden, only his Stormbringer is not a magical artifact but a demonic goddess he carries within himself, bound to him through a ritual he did not seek and cannot undo. This goddess, named Chugaachik, is a Shiva-like destructive force that even other deities recoil from in disgust and fear. She gives Fool Wolf great power, but the price she exacts in blood and torture is one he tries again and again to reject ... until circumstances force him to call upon her to save his own skin, which happens with grim regularity. Like Bruce Banner desperate to be free of the Hulk, Fool Wolf travels in search of someone able to exorcise or destroy Chugaachik.

In the course of his wanderings, which give the book its episodic structure, he encounters Lepp Gaz, a sorcerer versed in vile blood magic; Lady She'de'ng, sister to Hezhi of The Waterborn, an amoral vixen; Uzhdon, the Opal of Nah, a paladin-like do-gooder who bears a god-invested sword; and Inah, the half-human daughter of a god known as Tattooed Python King. Keyes brings these characters onstage measuredly over the course of the first four story/chapters; in the remaining three, previously introduced characters and plotlines converge as an ancient evil even worse than Chugaachik sets its sights on Fool Wolf with surprising and moving results. Briskly told, with boundless energy and welcome flashes of humor to leaven the horror

(especially in the relationship between Fool Wolf and Uzhdon), *Hounds* may be a short work, but it is not a slight one.

The influence of Naomi Novik, Michael Swanwick, and Ellen Kushner is plain to see in ***Havemercy*** (Bantam Spectra, New York, hardcover, 400 pp., $22.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-80696-0), a first novel by two talented young authors, Jaida Jones and Danielle Bennett. Like Novik and Kushner, Jones and Bennett give their novel a social setting familiar from the world of Regency fiction: the country of Vostov, where most of the action takes place, is clearly modeled on the England of that time, as portrayed by writers like Jane Austen and Patrick O'Brien. And, again following Novik, Jones and Bennett introduce a Dragon Corps whose members play pivotal roles in defending the realm from a rapacious foreign power: in this case not France but the Ke Han Empire. The dragons flown by the devil-may-care corpsmen, however, are pure Swanwick: mechanical killing machines magically gifted with life and intelligence. The novel's title is the name of a particular dragon, the latest, most-advanced model, piloted by an all-but-psychotic top gun named Rook, one of the four main characters who serve as narrators, each providing a starkly different perspective on the unfolding action.

The others are Thom, a young scholar in Thremedon City, the Volstov capital; Margrave Royston, an aristocrat and magician exiled from Thremedon for a homosexual liaison; and Hal, a young tutor at the country household of Royston's brother, where the disgraced Margrave has been put out to pasture.

Sexuality is another area in which Jones and Bennett are indebted to the example of Kushner. But Royston's homosexuality and the relationship that develops between him and Hal, as well as a parallel relationship between Rook and Thom (and the additional fact that there are no main female characters at all), are presented more in keeping with the traditions of *yaoi* graphic novels and fiction, in which attractive young men pursue gay or gay-tinged relationships (which may or may not include overt sexual acts) for the delectation of a (mostly) young and straight female readership. In this sense only, *Havemercy* is a ground-breaking novel—it's the first American fantasy I've seen from a major publisher that doesn't simply appropriate elements of *yaoi*, watered-down for mainstream consumption, but instead throws it out there undiluted and unvarnished. It's a gutsy move for Bantam, because like all fanfic, *yaoi* has its own set of implicit rules or conventions, and the relationships of the characters, both physically and psychologically, are typically more ritualistic than realistic.

Precisely because it is a ground-breaking novel, I wish *Havemercy* were a better book. It's more than competently written—indeed, the individual voices are handled with flair, and

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it's impressive that two young authors, or two authors of any age, for that matter, could blend their individual voices as seamlessly and selflessly as Jones and Bennett do here. The initial chapters detailing the dawning attraction between Royston and Hal are sensitively done ... before the conventions of *yaoi* bind the characters in straitjackets from which they never emerge. But the story itself turns out to be a familiar one; I won't give away the hinge on which the plot turns, but I will say that Anne McCaffrey got there first ... and has returned to that well herself many times too often.

It's rare that I want a novel to be longer, but I think the authors did themselves a disservice here by cramming everything into a single volume. The last hundred or so pages of *Havemercy* are sketchy and rushed, with important actions occurring offstage, luck and coincidence helping characters toward their goals, and long chunks of time conveniently blipped over. A second book would have allowed the authors to give these matters the attention they deserved, and it would have also given them a chance to go beyond the confining conventions of *yaoi*. Now that would have been groundbreaking.

Paul Witcover

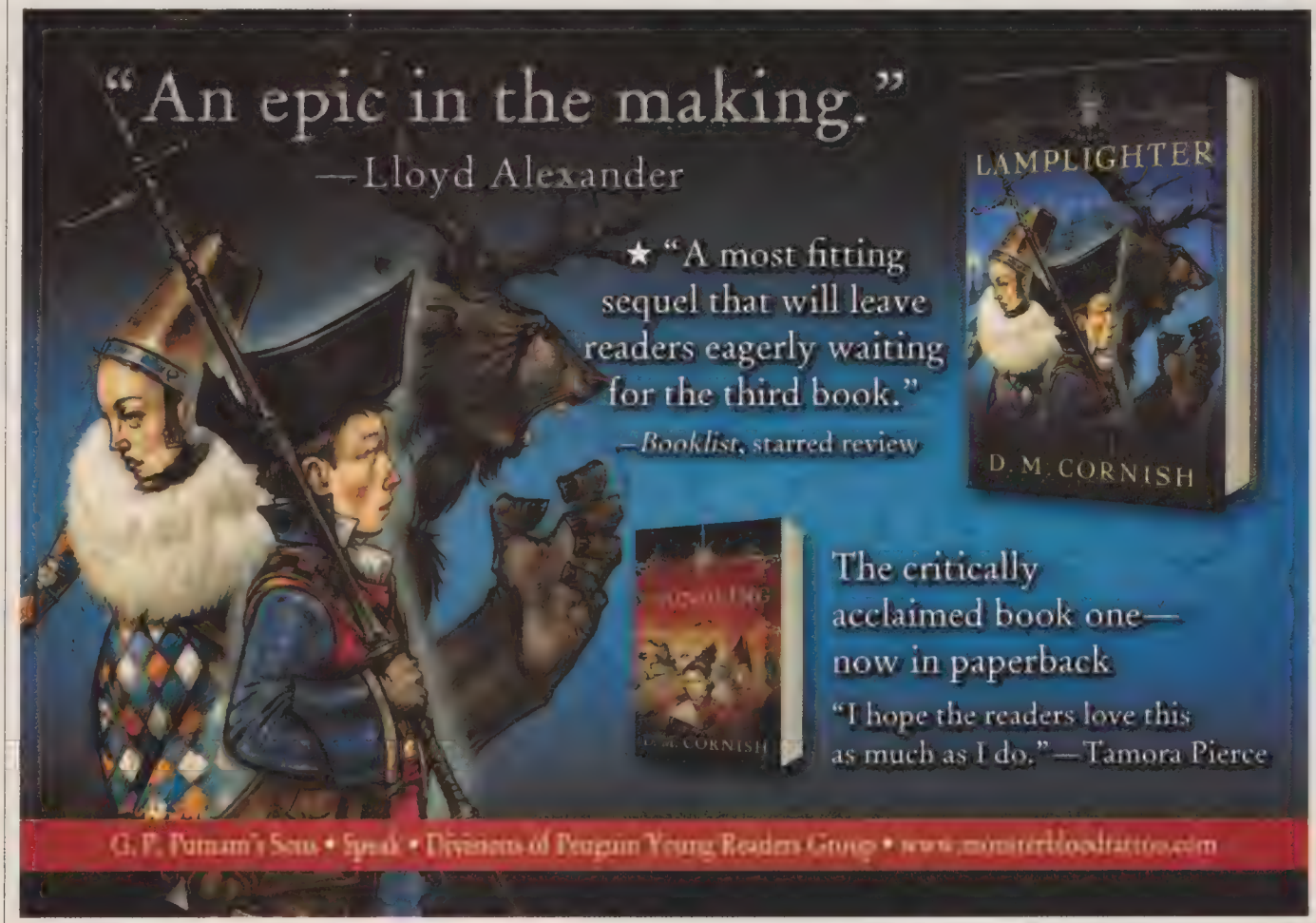
Artists Inspired by H.P. Lovecraft, ed. Jerad Walters, Millipede Press, Lakewood, CO, oversized hardcover, 400 pp., $395.00, ISBN: 978-1933618340.

Incomprehensibly comprehensive in its enormity, featuring the work, often in full-color, of Ian Miller, John Coulthart, Bob Eggleton, Allen Koszowski, Mike Mignola, Michael Whelan, Harry O. Morris, John Jude Palencar, and dozens of others, this delightfully overwhelming selection of art inspired by Lovecraft ... well, it boggles the mind. First, that anyone would attempt a book this beautiful and lovingly put together, and second that the results would be so perfect. In addition to eye-popping reproductions of iconic art, the editor has included substantial nonfiction by Stuart Gordon, Harlan Ellison, and Thomas Ligotti. Fold-outs provide additional pleasures, allowing for luxurious contemplation of many complex pieces. Pulp art coexists with more subtle approaches. A listing in the back contains thumbnails of each image in the rest of the tome, along with additional reference information. It's hard to pick favorites, but Coulthart's oddly formal yet utterly bizarre "portraits" of Lovecraft and Ian Miller's weird frog-lizard-demon tableaus are particularly compelling. If ever a book automatically deserved awards consideration ...

Bring Down the Sun, Judith Tarr, Tor, New York, NY, hardcover, 224 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-0397-4.

Taut, stylized melodrama doesn't come much better than *Bring Down the Sun*. This is the first time I've read Tarr, and I'm happy to have had the experience. Set in ancient Greece and Macedonia, the novel tells the story of the mother of Alexander the Great, first named Polyxena and then renamed Myrtale by her lover, Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander). Using the powers of the fading Mother goddess, Myrtale cements her position within a family that will come to conquer half the world. This novel is unabashedly sensual and erotic at times, but doesn't slide into silliness, in large part because Tarr never winks at the reader. She also wastes no words here, using an emotive but restrained style. In addition, unlike in some door-stopper historical fantasies, there are no long plot-stopping explanations of the setting. Despite this, Tarr manages to immerse the reader in an alien, remote past. I must admit to not being a huge fan of mother-goddess ritual in fiction, but here, providing evidence of Tarr's writing talent, it is both interesting and necessary.

Midnight Never Comes, Marie Brennan, Orbit, New York, NY, 400 pp., trade paper,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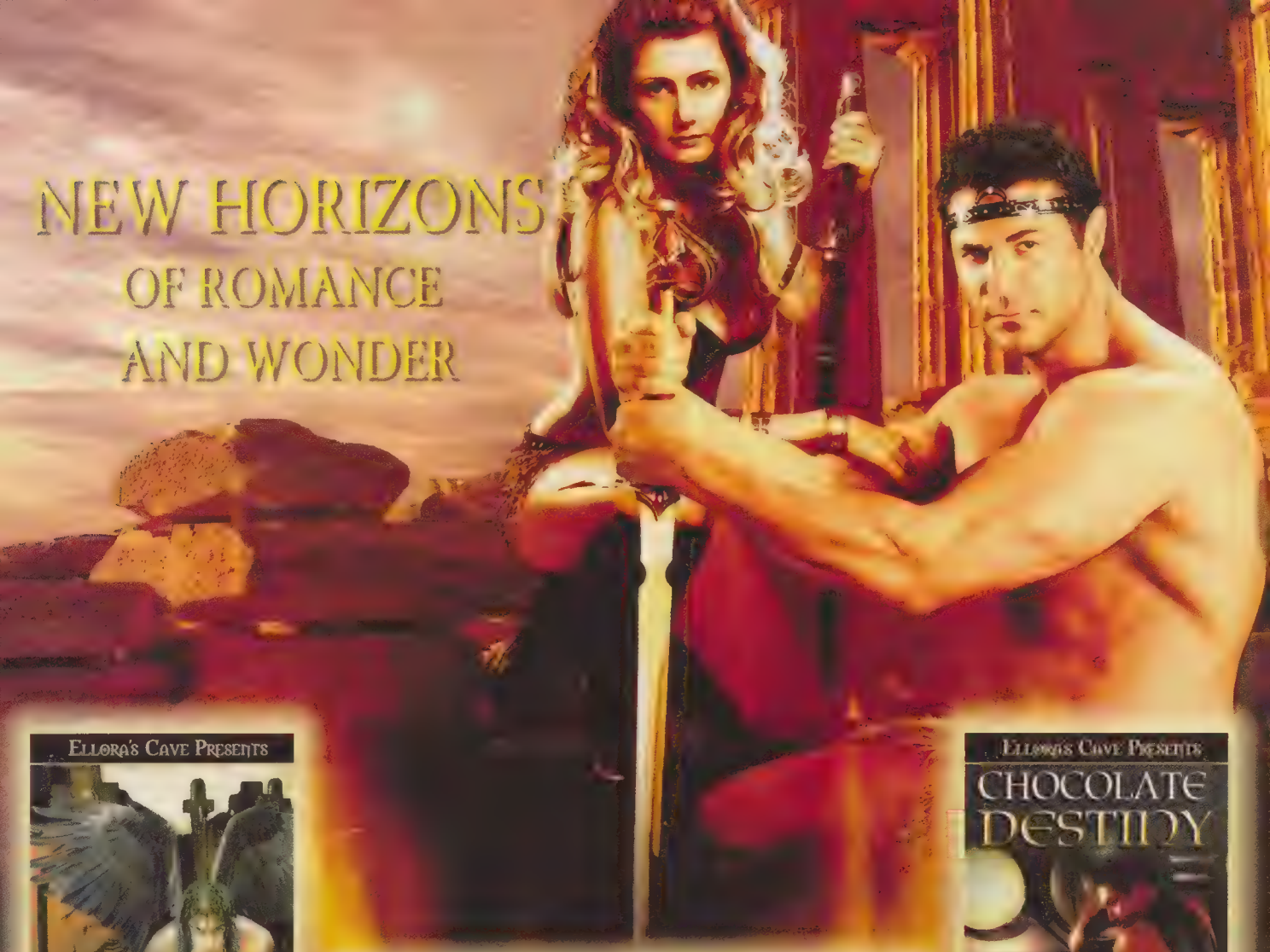

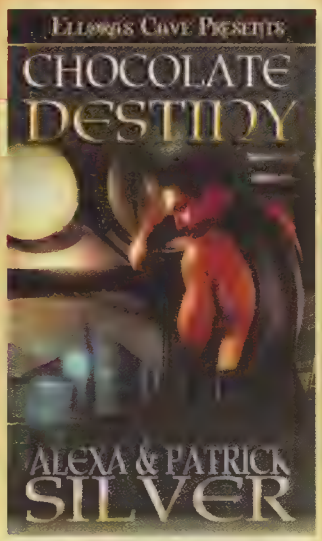

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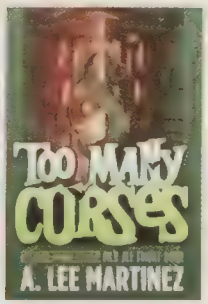
$14.99, ISBN 978-0-316-02029-9.

I'm an easy touch for novels with subterranean settings, and in Marie Brennan's accomplished *Midnight Never Comes* the underground takes the form of hidden catacombs beneath fifteenth-century London. The Queen of the Faeries holds court there, presiding over a kind of shadow society. Invidiana is her name, and as Elizabeth rules above so she rules below. A deadly game of espionage occurs between the two courts, with the fairy Lune sent to subvert the Elizabeth's spymaster. Michael Deven, one of the spymaster's agents, discovers Lune and the "hidden kingdom," with startling repercussions. Lune may need to betray her mistress; Deven has his own choices to face. The novel's style is muscular but clever, grounded in good characterization but lightened in pleasurable fashion by a kind of wry humor. As with Bring Down the Sun, although in more pragmatic fashion, the novel conveys a historical setting briskly but with enough detail to be convincing. Although the kingdom of faery has been overused in fantasy fiction, Brennan's infusion of spying and political maneuvering gives *Midnight Never Comes* a freshness and complexity that lift it above the ordinary.



Filter House, Nisi Shawl, Aqueduct Press, Seattle, WA, trade paperback, 288 pp., $18.00, ISBN: 978-1-933500-19-5.

Aqueduct Press, headed up by L. Timmel Duchamp, continues to offer unique, thought-provoking fiction by authors readers often cannot find through other publishing houses. Nisi Shawl's excellent collection *Filter House* is a good example. These fourteen stories, including three originals, share a striking freshness linked to unique points of view. Sometimes Shawl opens with a great hook, as with the opening of "The Water Museum": "When I saw the hitchhiker standing by the sign for the Water Museum, I knew he had been sent to assassinate me." Other times, she invokes African and African-American folklore or weaves a unique riff on fairytales, as with "The Princess Pragmatic" or "The Beads of Ku." "Good Boy," meanwhile, is a crazy and unique post-cyberpunk novelette. The provenance of these stories—from the *Dark Matter* anthologies to *Asimov's SF Magazine, Strange Horizons* to *Detroit Noir*—also provides proof of the diversity, and talent, on display here. The common thread to all of these stories is Shawl's pragmatic, sharp yet comfortable voice. *Filter House* is a great treat for anyone who likes good writing and, come awards time, *Filter House* deserves serious consideration.

Too Many Curses, A. Lee Martinez, Tor, New York, NY, trade paperback, 320 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-5458-7.

The death of Margle the Horrendous, master wizard, unleashes all manner of chaos, from curses to monsters, dark doors and darker sorceries. Which is just what Nessy the Kobold, long responsible for taking care of the castle, doesn't need. Now she's faced with trying to defeat any number of sinister forces, armed primarily with a body-less voice, a jar-wizard, and a ... I don't know if I can actually write this, but I'll try ... a one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people eater. Yes, that's right folks: you're in Gonzo Fantasy Zone. Luckily, as Martinez has shown before, he's a master of the Light Touch and the Right Touch. For the most part, *Too Many Curses* is a pleasant romp, with enough laughs to make up for the fact that this kind of humorous fantasy has been published now for more than twenty years. Perfect vacation reading while lazing on the beach or on a deck, in the mountains or in a cabin.

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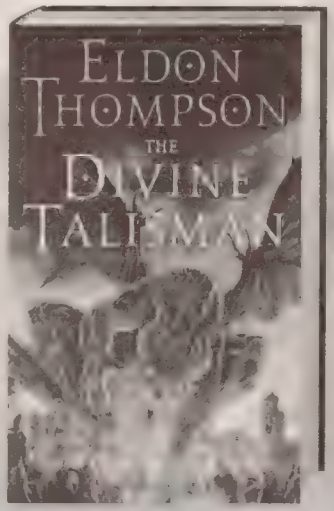

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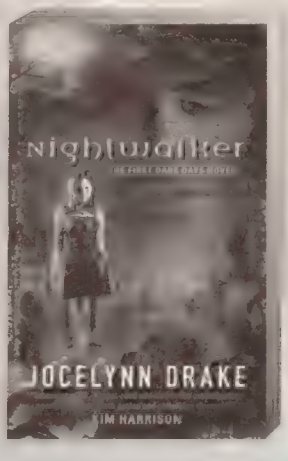

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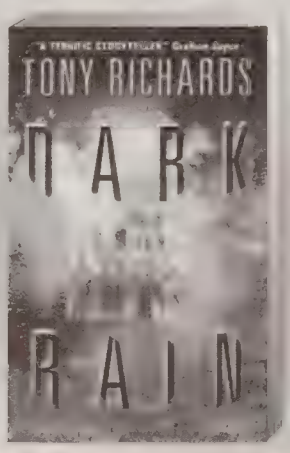

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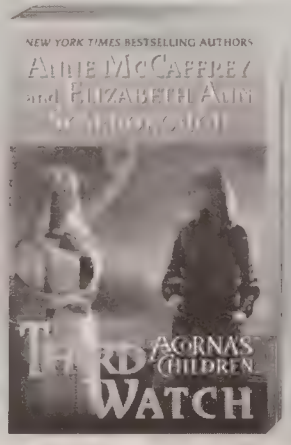

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— *Booklist* on the *Acorna* series

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By Terri Windling

The door in the hill leads to other worlds, to place, to power, and to home.

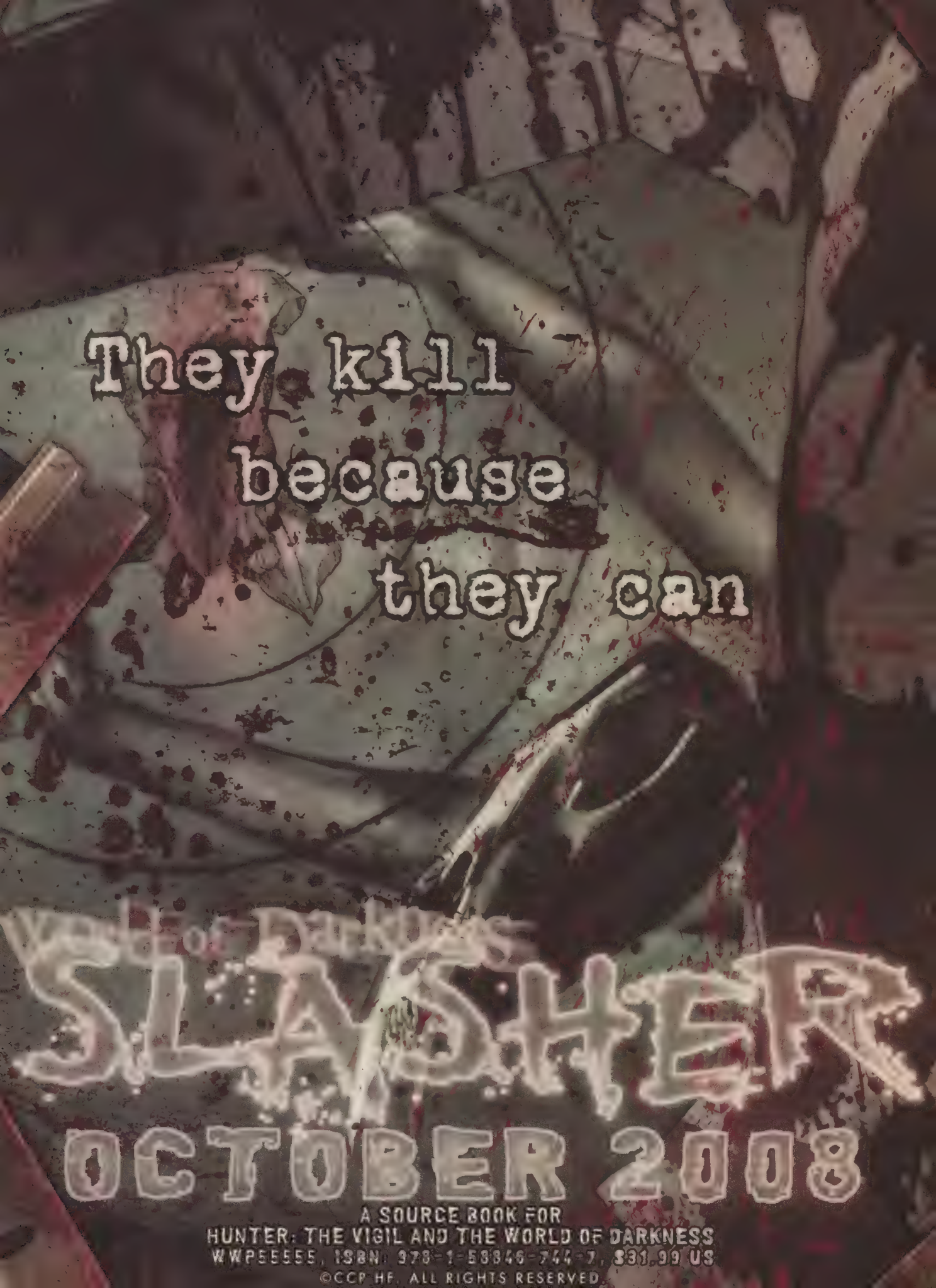
Some years ago, Shawna McCarthy phoned to tell me that she'd been named the editor of a brand new magazine, *Realms of Fantasy*. She wanted the magazine to feature a regular column on folklore and myth, and she asked if I would be interested in creating such a column. I said "yes" in a heartbeat.

"Folkroots" debuted in the very first issue of *RoF* in October 1994. In the fourteen years since, I've written over 40 Folkroots articles (on subjects ranging from Little Red Riding Hood to trickster myths; from Celtic ballads to gypsy lore), and edited numerous "guest columns" by other writers and scholars in the mythic arts field: Heinz Insu Fenkl (on Korean folk tales and shamanism), Ari Berk (on labyrinths, deer, and runes), Kristen McDermott (on the folklore in Shakespeare's plays), Helen Pilinovsky (on Baba Yaga and *Donkeyskin*), Midori Snyder (on *The Armless Maiden* and the magic of the kitchen), and many others. This column, however, will be the last Folkroots published under my editorial direction.

Middle-Earth is one of many worlds readers can escape to via fantasy literature. Photographer Rob Chandler captured this image of a Hobbit hole.

It's been a fascinating job, and a joy to work with the talented *Realms of Fantasy* team—but it's time for a change, both for me and for the column. It's time for Folkroots to head in new directions, with new voices and new perspectives on myth and mythic fiction. This being my last column, I'd like to draw upon themes explored in previous articles over the years to talk about magical stories—about why they matter, and why they matter to me.

First, let me pose some questions: What's the first childhood story that you remember? What was your favorite fairy tale? Which stories entranced you, bewildered you, or frightened you in your early years? We're all shaped by these childhood stories, formed by them just as we are formed by our genes, our family upbringing, and the society we live in. Our culture, too, is shaped by stories—the stories we learn, the stories we tell, the stories we collectively agree to believe in. Every day we're inundated by stories: on radio, television, and film; in newspapers and magazines. Advertising is based on selling us stories about who we are and what we need; as is politics, where stories are "spun" (in the media-jargon sense of the word) from the raw fiber of unpalatable truths. History itself is a story told and retold, constantly reassessed and revised. We even live our lives as stories, selecting and crafting our memories to give our past a plot structure, narrative cohesion, and some semblance of meaning; and as we do so, we're influenced by all the other stories that we've been told. We're also influenced, often more than we know, by the stories imbibed in our earliest years. Go back to the story



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that you loved the most, or that affected you the most, in your childhood, and you're likely to find its themes echoing throughout your whole life's journey.

For many years this curious phenomenon has puzzled and intrigued me. What is it about these early stories—the magical tales and hero tales so beloved by children around the world—that causes them to reverberate so deeply in our psyches long after? What is it that keeps certain stories alive to be passed from generation to generation? Why, in a modern and rational world, do some of us still hunger for magic and marvels long beyond our childhood years, while others reject the fantastic with an absolutism bordering on fear? What strange power do "primitive" myths still hold? What do fairy tales have to tell us today? I have no simple answer to these questions; I can only do what women have done in fields, forests, and firesides all throughout human history. I will tell you a story. A story about stories. And it begins Once Upon a Time.

Illustration by Arthur Rackham

Cinderella seeks her own salvation in the original, 16th- and 17th-century versions of the tale.

Once upon a time there was a girl who was forced to flee her childhood home. Why? Let's never mind that now. Perhaps her parents were too poor to keep her. Perhaps her mother was an ogre or a witch. Perhaps her father had promised her to a troll, a tyrant, or a beast. She left home with the clothes on her back, and soon she was tired, hungry, and cold. As night fell, she took shelter in a desolate graveyard thick with nettles and briars. Beyond the graves was a humpbacked hill and in the side of the hill was a door. The girl walked toward the door and saw a golden key standing in its lock. She turned the key, opened the door, and crossed over the threshold ...

I can still remember that moonlit night, but I don't remember how old I was—only that I was past the age when a girl should still believe in magic. Cold and quietly miserable in a childhood that seemed never-ending, I sat hunkered down in the grass among the gravestones of my grandfather's church, trying to conjure a portal to a magic realm by sheer force of will. Like many children, I longed to discover a door to Faerie, a road to Oz, a wardrobe leading to Narnia, and I wanted to believe that if I wished with all my strength and all my will then surely a door would open for me. Surely they would let me in.

I wanted to flee unhappiness, yes, but there was more to my desire than this—more than just escape from the intolerability of Here and Now. My desire was also a spiritual one—for we often forget that spiritual quest is

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a common and natural part of childhood, as young people struggle to understand how they fit into the world around them. That night, my solemn conviction was that I did not fit into the world I knew, and so I sought to cross into some other world, through the power of imagination. Did I really think it might be possible? To tell the truth, I no longer know. But my longing for that door was real; and my sharp, physical, painful desire for the things I imagined lay just beyond: Vast, unmapped, unspoiled forests. Rivers that were clean and safe to drink. Wolves and bears who would guide my way once I'd learned the power of their speech. My childhood in the ordinary world was a transient, uprooted one; but beyond the door I'd find my place, my power, and my true home.

Like many children hungry for intimate connection with the spirit-filled unknown, what I failed to manifest that night I found in my favorite children's books—in fairy tales, myths, and other tales of border-crossing and enchantment. I read these stories over and over. I devoured them and I needed them. But there came a time when I understood that I was growing too old for fairy stories, and I slipped them to the back of the shelves, embarrassed by my attachment to them. I was dutiful. I read "realistic" books about teen detectives, inventors, and spies; I read teen romances and girl-with-horse novels. I watched the wholesome Brady Bunch and the Partridge Family on television ... and nowhere in the popular culture of the sixties did I see a life and a family that was remotely like mine. Secretly, I still preferred those fairy stories that I was meant to outgrow. I found a strange kind of comfort in them, though I couldn't have told you why.

If only I'd known that in centuries past such stories weren't labeled "For Young Children Only," I wouldn't have felt so obliged to hide these volumes behind Nancy Drew. I wish I'd known that magical tales had been loved by adults for thousands of years—in the form of myths and ballads, epic romance, folk tales and fables, tales of the saints, and in celebrated literary works by Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and so many others. In Europe, the oldest known fairy tale collections were published in adult editions, savored by the literary avant garde in 16th-century Italy and 17th-century France. These early versions of familiar tales (*Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White,* etc.) were sensual, dark, and morally complex. In *Sleeping Beauty,* the princess is awakened not by a chaste, respectful kiss, but by the birth of twins after the prince has come, fornicated with her sleeping body, and left again (returning to a wife back home). In older versions of Snow White's tale, a passing prince claims the girl's dead body and locks himself away with it, pronouncing himself in love with his beautiful "doll," whom he intends to wed. His mother, complaining of the dead girl's smell, is greatly relieved when her son's macabre

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fiancé comes back to life. In older versions of the *Bluebeard* narrative (such as *Silvernose* and *Fitcher's Bird*), the heroine does not sit trembling while waiting for her brothers to rescue her—she outwits her captor, kills him, and restores the lives of her murdered predecessors. Cinderella doesn't sit weeping in the cinders while talking bluebirds flutter around her; she is a clever, angry, feisty girl who seeks her own salvation—with the help of advice from her dead mother's ghost, not the twinkle of fairy magic.

It was not until the 19th century that volumes of fairy tales aimed specifically at children became the industry standard, supplanting the arch, sophisticated editions penned by authors of previous generations. Advances in cheap printing methods had created a hot new market in children's books, and Victorian publishers sought products with which to tap into this lucrative trade. Ironically, the way was led by two scholarly German folklorists, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, editors of a German folk tale collection published for fellow academics. Upon realizing that a larger audience could be found among children and their parents, the Grimms revised their collection to make the tales more suitable for young readers, altering the stories more and more with each subsequent edition. The commercial success of the Grimms volume was noted by publishers in Germany and beyond, and soon there were numerous other fairy tale books aimed specifically at children—filled with stories drawn from 16th-, 17th-, and 18th-century fairy tale literature, now simplified and heavily revised to reflect Victorian "family values" and gender ideals.

As the next century dawned, the pendulum of adult literary fashion swung to tales of domestic realism while fairy tales and fantasy

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were increasingly left to the kids. Worse was to come as the century progressed, for Walt Disney would do more to turn fairy tales into pap than all of the Victorian fairy books put together as he rendered classic stories into animated films deemed suitable for American family viewing. Responding to criticism of the extensive changes he'd made in fairy tales like *Snow White*, Disney said, "It's just that people now don't want fairy stories the way they were written. They were too rough. In the end they'll probably remember the story the way we film it anyway."

Disney's fairy tale films, and the imitative books they spawned, went a long way to foster the modern misconception that fairy tales are children's stories, and have always and only been children's stories. Yet fairy tales, J.R.R. Tolkien pointed out (in his lecture "On Fairy-stories," 1938), have no particular historical association with children; they'd been pushed into the nursery like furniture the adults no longer want and no longer care if its misused. "Fairy-stories banished in this way," he said, "cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined; indeed, in so far as they have been so banished, they have been ruined."

It was Tolkien himself who was largely responsible for bringing magical tales back to an adult audience, which he did through the international success of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's books surprised many critics by striking a chord with readers of all ages and from all walks of life, directly challenging the assumption that fantasy had no place on adult bookshelves. Today, a generation of readers who have grown up with Bilbo and Frodo Baggins—not to mention Sparrowhawk, Harry Potter, Lyra Belacqua, and the whole modern fantasy publishing genre—may not fully comprehend the boundary-busting nature of Professor Tolkien's achievement. In the place and time where I grew up, for example, there were only a very few fantasy books available in the local library (the Narnia books, the Oz books, *The Wind in the Willows*, a handful of others), strictly confined to the children's section—and somewhat suspect even there. Fantasy, I understood, was like the training wheels on my first two-wheel bike: a forgivable crutch at the outset, but one I was meant to progress beyond needing. I hadn't progressed. I still craved such tales, though they stood on shelves meant for much younger kids. A worried librarian actually took *The Blue Fairy Book* out of my check-out stack, replacing it with a more "age appropriate" (and insipid) story about a perky camp counselor. The message was clear: fantasy belonged to the children who still played with dress-up dolls, and my craving for it led me to think *there was something wrong with me*. It was only later that I learned that others shared this craving, including adults. "I desired dragons with a profound

Further Reading

Women Mean to Do Wild Wonders: Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales, edited by Kate Bernheimer

Mothers and Monsters: An Anthology of Mom and Fairy Tales, edited by Kate Bernheimer

Our Wicked Mothers: How Fairy Tales Shape Our Lives by Sheldon Cashdan

Spinning Straw into Gold by Joan Gould

Don't Let the Grownups Tell You: The Subversive Power of Children's Literature by Alison Lurie

How Fairy Tales Changed My Life by Anne Lamott

"Spells of Enchantment: The Fairy Tale Epoch" by Helen Wheeler (The Horn Book Magazine, July 2001) [redacted] online at www.hbook.com

The Great Fairy Tale Debate: Bettelheim, Tatar, Zipes, and Others by Francis Spufford

Oh Yeah, Well Here's Fairy Tales and the Children of Childhood by Maria Tatar

Dark Magic: Fantasy, Fairy Tales, Folklore, and the Literature of Childhood by Jack Zipes

Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre by Jack Zipes

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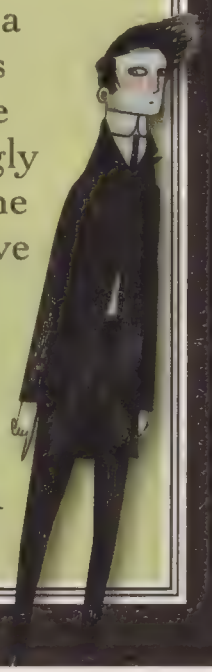

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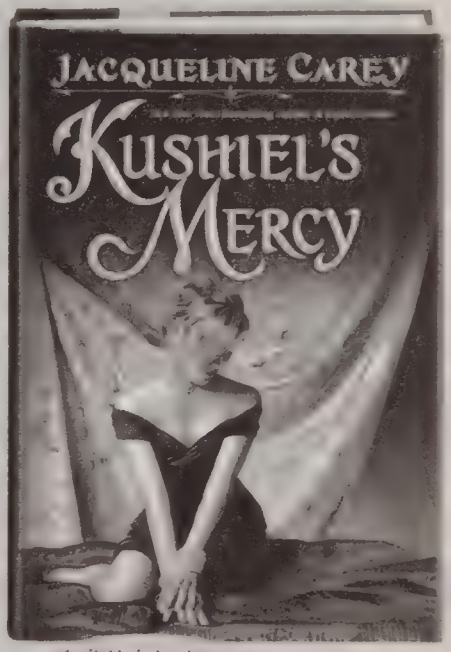

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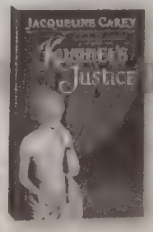

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—*Booklist* (starred review)

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desire," wrote J.R.R. Tolkien of his own adolescence. "Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighborhood.... But the world that contained even the imagination of Fáfnir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever the cost of peril."

It wasn't until I turned fourteen that I discovered Tolkien's trilogy, although the books had been available in American editions for some years before that. I began *The Fellowship of the Ring* on the school bus on a gray winter morning, reading with pure amazement as Middle-Earth opened up before me. Here, in the language of fantasy, was a story that seemed more real to me than any "realistic" story I knew—a story about danger, terror, and courage; about the cost of heroism and the importance of moral choices. In Middle-Earth, as in my parent's house, an epic battle between good and evil was waging, and even a humble, seemingly powerless creature like a hobbit could affect its outcome.

Some months after *The Lord of the Rings,* I discovered Tolkien's slim volume *Leaf by Niggle* containing his lecture/essay "On-Fairy Stories"—which was, for me, a more influential text than all the good professor's celebrated fiction. It was here I first learned that fairy tales had an old and a noble lineage—and that they'd once been more, so much more, than the Disney versions known today. I dug out my favorite fairy tale books and I read the old tales with new eyes; and this time I understood why I'd clung to these stories for so many years. Like Tolkien's books, they addressed *large* subjects: good and evil, cowardice and courage, hope and despair, peril and salvation—all subjects not unfamiliar to children raised in embattled households. Fairy tales spoke, in their metaphorical language, of danger, struggle, calamity—and also of healing journeys, self-transformation, deliverance, and grace. They are stories of children abandoned in woods; of daughters poisoned by their mothers' hands; of sons forced to betray their siblings; of young men and women struck down by wolves or imprisoned in windowless towers. The fairy tales that I loved best were variations on one archetypal theme: a young person beset by grave difficulties sets off, alone, through the deep, dark woods. Armed with quick wits, clear sight, persistence, courage, compassion, and a dollop of luck, he or she meets every challenge, solves every riddle, and transforms him/herself and his/her fate. This was my story, my myth, the central text and theme of my young life's journey. This was the story I needed to hear again and again and again.

And so, let me ask you one more time: what was your favorite fairy tale, or myth, or book when you were small? Tell me your story; I'll tell you mine; and together, we'll conjure a door in the hill. Beyond it we'll find fantasy worlds where dragons fly and the animals speak. Where heroes prevail, and children are safe, and doors open when they need them. ❧

JESSICA INCLÁN

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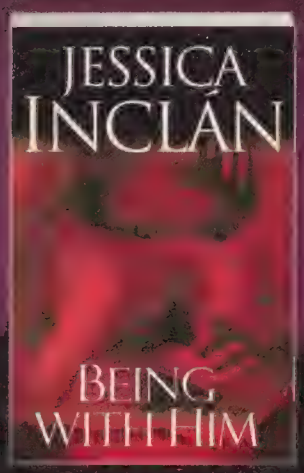

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The Eve of St. John falls at the highest point of summer, the night before the longest day of the year, when everything in the garden is growing so fast the sound of unfurling keeps you awake at night, and the plants strain against their ropes and trellises like hot-air balloons, dropping fruits like sandbags.

It is a very inconvenient time to dance with the Devil.

I have weeds to dig and seedlings to nurse, honey to coax from the comb and bees to soothe after I do it. There is powdery mildew on the roses; I must keep after it with a yellow tincture of boiled sulfur. There are babies to bring and summer-dreaming mothers to scold, newborn kittens to save from the burlap and foundlings to raise (and contrary to what the gossiping women of Mataró say, I only ever stole one of them; my little Butterfly, who I took from the loft of a drunken butcher in Barcelona. And that was on Christmas Eve, and everyone knows that a child left home alone on Christmas Eve will be stolen by witches. Should be stolen by witches, to look at her today; when I put her in my bag ten years ago, her bones were hollow as horsetails and there were yellow-purple bruises on her throat. Since then she has grown plump on honey and cream.)

I have loved them all, my foundlings. I have raised and taught them, dozens of them, and set each one on the way to meet her Destiny. But none of them have made my heart ache as it does when Butterfly asks if she too has a Destiny. The dread keeps me from answering; I frown and say nothing.

There is so much to be done in the long hot days before St. John's Eve that many of us—the Middle Ones especially—grumble over the time lost as we pack our things and mutter spells of protection over

The Purple Basil

BY M.K. HOBSON
ILLUSTRATION BY
TIFFANY PROTHERO

Passion, jealousy, regret ...
Long-term relationships carry a weight heavier than just the burden of years.

locks and windows, reciting an ever-growing list of detailed instructions to the ones we leave behind.

"Auntie, why do you fuss so?" Butterfly sighs with irritation as I go over the list with her one more time. "You act as if you do not want to go."

"Perhaps I do not," I say.

"You want to," she is weary with the wisdom of the young. Already, she can see clearly into me, though she has not gone to the sea. When I am silent, she adds: If you don't want to go, then don't. There is challenge in her eyes.

I remind her once again about not eating all the lavender honey, and leave it at that.

There is no question of not going, of course. It is the highest point of summer and His words are screaming between my ears, demanding release. They ache to be spoken, they ache to summon Him. It is so with all witches in the time of Midsummer's approach. And so, on St. John's Eve, we all come to the Valley of the

Valley, era Val d'Aran, to give His words back to him. To summon Him and dance with Him, to gather the herbs and savories planted for us in past years, back into time beyond remembering. To bring our own gifts to plant for the Young Ones, now woozy with beauty and new power, who wear flowers in their hair and make God's men and women sick with desire. The Young Ones cannot believe they will ever be interested in the plants that we bring for their future use. They move within a diffuse glow, a semi-sacred stupor; His words ring loud in their heads like a constant song of love, send them reeling from pleasure to pleasure. They believe it will be so forever. We have all believed it in our turn, a foolishness certainly, but a forgivable one.

This year, I am bringing a large pot of purple basil. It is not the most impressive offering that will be brought to the high valley. It cannot be used to induce soothsaying dreams, or cool plague-fever, or breed remorse in the heart of a man who deserves to feel it. Other sisters work the whole year to develop cultivars of just such power and potency, herbs that will be admired and envied by all, but I scorn such competition. The purple basil is hearty and useful and pretty. Butterfly says that when she tastes it in a tomato sauce, it makes her think of every moment in her life she's ever known happiness.

It is witchcraft enough.

It is a three-days climb from the sea to the mountains, to the end of the highest valley in the Pyrenees. Across farmlands and fields, up past the last village, beyond which the road becomes the merest sketch and God's men and women are warded off by ancient sigils and boneworks. Saw-toothed cliffs jut up around a flat-bottomed cirque, and we are enfolded, our songs and smoke amplified by ancient flint and schist.

In the smooth green bowl of the valley's end, the campment of tents and bent-willow lean-tos bustles with the activity of new arrivals. The witches gather from hundreds of miles around, from France and Andorra in the east, Aragon in the west. Some come across the sea, from Algiers, Corsica, Morocco. Some arrive on brooms, in the traditional fashion. Some ride cats or deer, or transform themselves into eagles or starlings. There is the smell of cookfires and smudging sage, the sound of bells and high laughter, old wrinkled faces and sagging breasts, young smooth faces and trim waists, women like flowers on a single plant, some fading, some falling, some in bud, some in bloom.

I set up camp—a sturdy tent of canvas and hemp, a blanket-roll of heavy wool lined with soft bright paisley—and I start cooking. On my way here I pulled a fat string of pink-bellied trout from a mountain stream; from the cradling arms of decaying trees I took wild mushrooms. Saffron milk caps, blue spot knights, gray knights. If there is anything I have forgotten, I will pull it from the spelled burlap sack I carry slung across my back. It is large enough that I can crawl into it and be home any time I like. Butterfly doesn't know this; she may get a nasty surprise if I come home for my pepper mill and find all my new honey eaten up.

I push crisping trout around in a cast-iron pan. A Young One arrives with a piping flourish of silver cornets, their bright tone tingling down my neck. She enters the valley like a sorcerous queen, borne aloft on an ebony sedan chair by four white apes, their curling fur draped with swags of red silk. The extravagant procession stops a little way from me, at a juicy little rise overhung by weeping willows. Shimmering down from her throne, she dismisses her fantastical transport with a flick of her bangled wrist. Then, plucking a rosebud from the bouquet that crowns her hickory-colored curls, she kisses it, and throws it to the ground with a murmured word. It billows into an arched bower of crimson roses, sorcelled glowworms humming softly within each bloom. The bed within is spread with a leopard skin. She vanishes behind curtains of sky-colored gauze, to prepare and perfume and flavor herself, to wait.

With my eyes, I make meaningful note to another witch who has set up camp nearby, a Middle One like myself. She is stirring a simmering pot of *escudella i carn d'olla*; it smells fantastic. We share a secret smile. We have all writhed for His attention, some more fancifully than others. But now there are gardens to grow and village priests to appease and lovesick youths to keep from suicide. Now, I am more interested in my purple basil than I am in His passion, and St. John's Eve is a very different thing.

To become a witch, it is said, a girl must go to the sea. She must undress completely, stretch herself out on the damp sand, and roll over seven times. After this, she must stand and make three circles. She must do all of this seven times, each time repeating the Lord's Prayer backward. If these mystical gyrations can be completed without the girl being seen, then she will become a witch. If not, she will remain a blessedly unstained servant of the true church, and should (so the gossiping women of Mataró say) take herself straight to a nunnery in thanks for God's divine intercession.

It is all complete nonsense.

It is true that a girl must go to the sea. And it is true that there are words she must say, but the words are hers alone. They are His invitation, His first and most enduring gift. The words make themselves known to her as other features of womanhood make themselves known; gradually, in a series of small and alarming shocks. Fragments of a girl's incantation may first begin to itch between her ears when she is still very young, eight or nine. She may not have the whole spell in her mind, bell-clear and ready for the speaking, for many years after that. But once the spell is in a girl's mind, she will be drawn to the sea, where her final decision must be made. She must decide if she will speak to the waves, to the sand and salt and foam, if she will meet Him and let Him mark her, let her life become His.

Because I live by the sea, I make a special study of the girls who come to it. When I see one arrive in my dusty little village, addled as a lemming, moving with dreamy muttering haste toward the jagged rocks and white sand beach, I bring her inside, sit her down at the table in the kitchen, make a cold pitcher of sangria with plenty of strong red wine and oranges from the tree beside my back door. I tell her to ignore Butterfly, who is sure to be staring through the crack in the old oak door. I give her a handkerchief to dry her tears.

I speak to her of the life that awaits her, should she go to meet Him at the sea. I speak in low, rhythmic tones until her blank-eyed madness has passed, until she wakes up. I cannot eradicate the words that have been growing in her head, that have flowered into such puzzling desire; nothing can. Whether she goes to the sea or not, the words are hers, and will be until she dies.

Some flee in tears. Some wake from their fever-dream, fumble for silver communion crosses and kiss them, then spit on me and call me *bruixa*. Others simply nod, and creep out silently at dawn. These are the ones I will see later, at the next St. John's Eve, in a bower of crimson roses and glowworms made to catch His attention.

Butterfly would never behave so foolishly, I tell myself. I think of her strong brown limbs, her cynic's eyes, her mathematician's mouth. But still, there are as many different kinds of foolishness as there are Young Ones to succumb to them, and some humilations are even worse than roses and glowworms. Some Young Ones become pathetic begging animals for want of Him, prostrating themselves at shrines built of glowing metaphor, supplicating Him as a mother pleads with a fractious child. Some become bitter and mean; they let tangles grow in their hair and eat ashes and live in caves and slaughter stray lambs for the ugliness of it, to confirm their belief in their own hideousness, to explain His absence with their own depravity.

I shudder.

Never, Butterfly, I think. *Never, my child.*

In the center of the Valley of the Valley, there stands a great oak tree in luxuriant leaf, a hundred feet tall and festooned with streamers of silver paper. When the cooking is done, we nestle our dishes, garnished with wildflowers and steaming in slip-decorated ceramic bowls, among the gnarled roots. The Old Ones, who no longer cook and who abandoned their bowers of roses long ago, chant Him down to us with their words, the words that have been their companions longer than anything. Naked in the hot slanting summer

sunset, they lift sagging arms to the sky and bring them down again. In response, swift velvet-winged bats dart down and take choice morsels from the bowls. A thousand small black tongues taste stews and cakes, tiny black claws seize flesh and fruit. The air flutters and darts with them, seeds of the short, frenzied night to come, dropping to earth and rising up again.

Afternoon becomes evening. Around the purpling valley, torches and bonfires are kindled. A song begins to rise, each of us singing the words that we carry in our heads, the words that are ours and ours alone, that always have been and always will be, our words to summon Him to us. The song rises and swells, floats up and spreads over us like a sacred veil, becomes perfume and promise.

Then, in that remote valley folded in arms of jagged stone, the madness begins.

In villages and hamlets all over the world, God's men and women are celebrating, just as we are. The Eve of St. John is a *festa major,* meant to mock the fear we inspire; devils and dragons with papier maché heads and ripped costumes dash beneath archways of glaring magnesium sparks, drums pound a thundersome doom, silver spoons beat pots and pans with a zealot's clangor. Images of saints are paraded through the streets. It is all intended to scare off witches, to keep them from dropping curses on the heads of God's men and women. But we are busy elsewhere. We too have devils and dragons and leering demons dressed in pomegranite red and sunflower yellow. But ours are real.

A serpent, fanged and red-eyed, her flesh and breasts slick slimed green, her flesh-webbed wings fanning over us with a sound like bees in clover. Braying asses and goat-legged satyrs. And Him, our only saint, dancing in the werelit smoke, arms outflung in an all-encompassing clawed embrace, tail lashing. The air smells of sweat and tears and smoke, and soon I am dizzy with it, as addled as the lemming-girls that come to my house by the sea. I release my words to the brilliance that wheels and burns above us, a *correfoc* of shooting stars, a hundred million mirror shards. They reflect my cries as if they were writ in flame on moonlight parchment.

I babble the words, chatter and chew them until they are ragged, and then I fall. I fall into a pile of women, writhing like a pit of newborn snakes. Hands and feet and arms and mouths slither over my body; I close my eyes and fall asleep. My words have been released, and He has heard them.

It is witchcraft enough.

That night, I dream of Butterfly, walking through the narrow cobbled streets of Mataró. It is St. John's Eve, and though there are hundreds of God's men and women in the crowd around her, she is alone. She is wearing a looped up skirt of crimson and a corselet that I have never seen before; the tight gold lacing pushes up her new breasts like grapefruits in a velvet basket. She slithers through the crowd, nosing herself beneath elbows and around waists; her cheeks are flushed and her eyes sparkle with reflected light of fireworks and flame. I see her lips moving, and I know that she is tasting her own words; they are ripening into the song that will be hers, the words that she will give only to Him.

Later, she will follow a dark-skinned laughing boy down twisted urban defiles, through alleyways of old brick. She will follow him, hardly knowing why, fascinated by a smell that teases her nose. The glimpse of the smooth dark skin at the back of his neck will make the words gibber and bubble between her ears; she will strain to catch the melody of them. She will not catch the boy. But she will know that she can find him again, if she goes to the sea.

I stir within the tangle of warm limbs; all around me witches are softly sleeping, overflung and entwined, dreaming of Him. I lift a hand to my cheek. It is damp, but with summer dew or with an old woman's tears? Even a witch cannot tell.

As the first fingers of dawn steal over the serrated stone peaks, I take my pot of purple basil and I walk into the leaf-dappled forest that rings the edges of the cirque.

By the morning light, everything seems exhausted; even the bird song is languid and perfunctory. I walk through rising mist over trampled grass, past the bower of crimson roses. The flowers are shedding wilted petals, the glowworms have been released from service, and the Young One is sobbing on her leopard skin. He did not come to her. He came to many others, but He did not come to her. She is shuddering silently, shoulders bunched with self-loathing. I pass by silently. Perhaps He will come to her another year. Or perhaps tangles will grow in her hair, and she will develop a taste for ashes, and she will be lost.

Beneath the birch trees I find a sunny spot that the basil will like. I carefully churn the soil, rich with decayed granite, rich with worms and mold and leaf. I tip the plant from its pot and press it into the ground, smoothing loam over its roots, murmuring spells to protect it from frost, abjuring insects not to eat of it too greedily, wishing it well.

There is no sound, no smell, no touch to betray Him, but I know when He comes to stand behind me. My heart loses its shape, and my body shudders with involuntary delight. He has come to hundreds of others, but now He is here for me alone, and He is mine.

He kisses the back of my neck, and His arms come around my shoulders, but I do not lean into His embrace. I pull away from Him. I feel His surprise; refuse the Devil once, and He likely will never ask again.

"I want you to take your words back," I say.

He stares at me with obsidian eyes. His skin is smooth and brown, a piece of teak polished by the Mediterranean sea. He has laughing eyes and a mischevious mouth and slender nimble limbs made for darting down alleyways.

"I could not live without you," He says, and there is such hurt and such truth in his voice, it startles me.

"Not from me," I say. "From Butterfly."

He is silent. He takes my hands and holds them. His hands are dark like my own. He runs his fingers over my fingers. My fingers are thick-seamed from hard work, crooked, not yet as crooked as the hands of the Old Ones, not yet. But soon they will be, and before many more St. John's Eves have passed we will be more like old friends than old lovers. He will rub enchanted ointment into my aching joints, and we will laugh and talk of old victories, old enemies, old loves. But not yet. That time is not yet.

He bends down to the basil I have planted, runs long fingers along the curling-edged leaves. He takes a bud of tender leaves between his fingers, plucks it just above where two larger leaves fan out. He crushes the bud between smooth, brown fingers, releasing the spicy scent.

"The plant will grow stronger for the pruning," He says. "Is it not so?"

I lower my head. I cannot look into His eyes anymore. I see hopeless women in them, hopeless women with His words gabbling in their heads, Old Ones and Young Ones and Ones Yet to Be and Ones Long Gone. He takes my face in His hands and lifts it, His fingers smelling of purple basil.

"Beloved," He says softly. "The words are not mine. I have not given them, and I cannot take them away, any more than a dream can stop itself from being dreamed."

And then He kisses me, and before I open my eyes again, He is gone.

Afterward, I sit by the purple basil until the sun is high in the sky and the ground is warm. I hope that Butterfly will find it some year, and know that I put it here for her. I hope that she will find it, and remember that love is not always agony. Most of all, I hope that her heart is too strong to create something strong enough to break it.

I listen to the words in my head, softened by release. I realize suddenly that they have always been spoken in my own voice, not in His.

"I could not live without you."

The truest words the Devil has ever spoken.

Rising, sore, I sling my burlap sack over my shoulder. I leave the Valley of the Valley to slumber for another year. There are growing things that I must return to, and it is a long walk home. ❧

In the biggest cities and
the smallest towns you'll find
them—the watchers.
Why do they watch so closely?
What do they see?

The Luckiest Street in Georgia

On the morning of her eighty-third birthday, Miss Minette sat in her rocking chair and looked at things. The sun had been up for a few hours over the east-facing porch. Sweat dripped underneath her black satin dress and pooled between her breasts. Her rib cage, slightly misshapen by corsets in her youth, felt sticky and moist. Even her scalp was hot underneath a black lace cap. Minette reached toward the nearby table and picked up her paper fan with a white-gloved hand. She spread it expertly and fanned herself, still looking at the street before her.

BY VYLAR KAFTAN
ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC DINYER

On this morning, a great deal of things required looking at. Minette turned her head slowly from left to right. In the garden a rabbit was eating the rosebushes she hadn't yet planted. The house kitty-corner had a new porch, built of a shiny material she couldn't identify. On the porch sat a dachshund, shivering in freezing rain. Next door a young couple rushed toward a strange vehicle in the street. It looked like a Model-T, which Minette had seen in a catalogue, but was shiny and apple-red.

The girl was in a delicate state—the sort that usually meant confinement. But Minette was used to people behaving oddly. As she watched, the couple hurried toward the vehicle. The woman—a pretty blonde girl, with short hair like a man's—wore a blue gemstone-studded jacket and glaringly pink pants. She stumbled against the dark-mustached man. Her knees buckled as she clutched her stomach. The man held her arm and supported her, soundlessly urging her forward. Minette focused on the woman's belly. *Wait a bit, child,* she thought. *Not yet. It's not your time yet.*

After a moment, the girl straightened and looked calmer. She smiled at the man and squeezed his hand. Minette looked at their clasped hands, something unnameable shifting inside her. The man opened the passenger door and closed it once the girl settled in. He ran to the driver's side and the vehicle sped away. Minette fanned herself. It was good that he cared for the girl so much, she thought—very good, that she had him for her husband. And good that this baby would grow up on her street where she could watch him.

Minette looked at the shivering puppy next. A young Negro boy with purple hair appeared in the doorway. He took the dog inside, which pleased Minette. She turned her attention to the roses, but it was too late—the rabbit had eaten the lowest blossoms. Too many things happened each day for her to see them all. Perhaps another day she would be able to watch the roses. Or perhaps she would never plant them at all, knowing what would happen.

The day's heat burned against her face. The fan moved hot air across her skin, barely cooling her. She scanned the street slowly, careful not to miss anything she needed to look at. She saved the house directly across the street for last. Sometimes he was there, and sometimes not. Today he wasn't. Minette guessed it was because she was looking for him. When she wasn't trying, she would see him looking back from the upper window, with his unkempt beard and old-fashioned hat—the anomaly. Tom. He was the only part of this street that she couldn't change.

When Martha arrived, she said, "Laws, Miss Minette, sittin' on the porch in this heat!"

Martha was a plump, good-natured woman who was widowed and happy about it. Her hemlines stayed just above her ankles, in a compromise between tradition and wartime shortages. She came over twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, to bring food for Minette and check up on her. The Ladies' Aid Society prided itself on caring for orphans and the elderly. The home-made goodies were supposed to offer relief from spinsterhood's plain foods, but Minette stretched them all week so that she didn't need to send for groceries. Lord knew how long her dwindling funds might need to last.

Minette liked Martha. Her visit was one of the few things that would draw Minette's attention away from watching her street. Martha talked a lot, but she was interesting—and Minette's only companion. Minette wasn't good at conversation. Even in her younger days, she'd been shy. Being jilted twice at the altar only drove her further into herself.

"Afternoon, Martha," said Minette. "How are you? Any news of Charles?"

"Not a word," said Martha, "but s'only been three weeks. He's gone a month with no writin' to his mother." She smiled tautly.

Martha's boy was in France fighting the Hun. Minette couldn't see that far. She said, "He'll write soon."

"Hope so."

Minette hoped so too. "You must miss him," she said, smoothing her heavy skirts and petticoats. Her pearl necklace was slick with moisture. Inside her buttoned boots and black stockings, her toes were wet. She wiggled her feet inside her shoes, trying to aerate them. Her ankles burned with the exertion.

"Aren't you meltin', Miss Minette? It's hotter'n anything. I'll make you an iced tea. How sweet do you take it?"

"Very, please. Thank you." Minette caught sight of a girl struggling to climb an oak tree. The tree was one Minette had planted herself in the front yard six years ago. It was a sapling for Minette, but a sprawling monster for the child.

"Lemon?"

"No, thank you." Minette watched the child—clothed like a boy, as so many were in the coming days. The girl wore dark blue pants, a purple sleeveless shirt, and strange pink shoes that reflected the light on one side. Her red braids were full of twigs and leaves. She clung to a high-up branch, looking determined. She reached for a distant branch. Minette watched her carefully, focusing her attention on—

"May I use one a'these blue glasses with the magnolias?"

"Yes."

"Pardon?"

"Yes, of course," Minette said, turning just a bit so Martha could hear her.

The girl slipped from the branch and dangled. Minette watched her intently. After a minute, the girl found strength and lifted herself to safety. She clung there for a moment, her body pressed against the rough bark, then reached for a different branch. Minette smiled. The girl was brave. She would conquer the tree.

"I swear, Miss Minette, I don't know what you look at all day," said Martha. She set two glasses of iced tea on the table, one with lemon. "This street is so quiet. Not even any kids playing out there."

"There will be," said Minette softly.

"Well, I s'pose so. Lots of little lovebirds in their nests. A new couple just bought that house over the way, down by the crossroads. The one that used to be the Filberts'."

"It'll be nice to have young people. There haven't been any here since I was a little girl."

"That's so, Miss Minette—born here, weren't you?"

"Yes," Minette said, sipping her tea. It was almost as sweet as she liked it. The cold glass felt wonderful against the pain in her fingers. "My grandfather was a French storekeeper. He worked his whole life to buy this house for his son as a wedding gift."

"My family's from Dahlonega, just come here a few years ago—but you know that, don't you. You must've seen so much in eighty-three years. Do you get lost in mem'ries sometimes, Miss Minette? Thinking about the way it used to be?"

"Sometimes," she said. More often she got lost thinking about the way things would become.

"You must know all the history here. Who married who, who died when." Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Who was cheatin', or lyin', or anything. I bet you know all that."

"Not really," Minette said, the words triggering an unhappy memory. "Lately the only news I get is from you." She fingered the pearls at her neck. Her mother had given them to her for her fortieth birthday, when it was clear that neither Frank nor Geoffrey would be back for her. She glanced at the abandoned house across the street. In the upper window she saw him: an old man, with a rough beard

and dark eyes, watching her. In a moment he was gone again.

"Oh, Miss Minette—we should get you a newspaper or somethin'. I'll talk to the Society."

Minette looked at the empty window. Tom had died before she was born. She didn't know why this piece of the past was visible. "I'd like that."

"I'll see what I can do." Martha took the empty glasses away. Minette rocked slowly, enjoying the cypress-scented breeze. She heard Martha bustling about the kitchen. Martha called, "I've made a ham sandwich for you, Miss Minette. I'll bring it out, then I'll be headin' home."

Minette nibbled on her sandwich as Martha walked away. When she was done eating, she sat and rocked, looking at things. A trio of butterflies rose from Mrs. Cooper's heliotropes and fluttered away. A pair of children fought over marbles, but she encouraged them to resolve it peacefully.

Soon she dozed off. She dreamed of herself as a young belle, bright with suitors. She stood in two churches at the same time, dressed in both her wedding dresses. In her dream, everyone watched her standing alone. Their stares burned through her, masking thoughts that no one spoke. She ran but her dresses tripped her up. She tumbled to the floor. People kept staring. Their eyes withered her into a wrinkled old lady, fallen on her knees in the back of the church. When she woke, she was alone, and it was dark.

Minette's mother had died muttering nonsense in an old but healthy body, leaving the house to her spinster daughter. Minette had always feared going the same way someday, with no siblings or children to care for her, but her mind was as sharp as ever. Instead she was losing her body. Her fingers betrayed her first, with sharp pain by the time she was fifty. The tightness moved through her arms until she couldn't hold small objects. She gave up quilting at seventy. The fire progressed through her body until any movement became painful. Walking to the outhouse and back was the worst part of her day.

As she shuffled toward her chair, she thought her ankles would ignite. She sank onto the oak seat, letting her petticoats cushion her bony backside. Today was hotter than the past two days—nearly as hot as Tuesday again. The afternoon smelled like magnolias and hyacinths. A fly buzzed across her vision. She blinked a few times and looked around, slowly, from left to right.

Her hearing had never been great, but her eyesight remained perfect. She saw an unfamiliar young couple holding hands as they walked past her house. The man wore a dark brown wool suit and scuffed shoes. The woman wore a blue gown with a black bodice, a large white-plumed hat, and an engagement ring larger than either of Minette's had been. Minette could hear them talking, which is how she knew they belonged in her time. Perhaps they were that new couple Martha had mentioned.

As they passed her chair, the man glanced her way. Minette met his gaze and kept rocking. He glared at her, and she smiled serenely. The man dropped the woman's hand. They spoke in angry whispers that Minette couldn't quite hear. The couple crossed the street and leaned against the tree. She watched them argue, willing all her concentration in their direction. The moment of change was hard to explain. Sometimes it was quick, like lighting a candle. Other times she was slow to look at things properly—she needed to really see them. The couple kept talking, and Minette watched. After a few minutes, the man smiled and kissed the woman. They took each other's hands again. Minette rocked, pleased that she'd made a difference.

Someday, when she passed on—maybe someone else would watch this street for her. It was a comforting thought. A series of watchers, linked like her pearls across time.

When she glanced at the house across the street, she saw Tom watching her. She could never describe the expression on his face. Longing, perhaps, or sorrow. No one had lived in the house for years. But she'd heard stories of Tom, the crazy old man who'd died before she was born. Everyone in town knew about him. He'd built that whole house alone when he was seventy—for a bride no one ever saw. When he died, he left the house nearly finished, with a brand-new wooden porch like Minette's. Now time had decayed the porch and half-rotted the stairs. People said the place was cursed, so no one would buy it. When Minette looked at the house, sometimes she saw an empty lot filled with metal chunks and crumpled paper. Or she saw the house as it once was, with Tom inside. Like now.

Tentatively, she lifted a hand in greeting. Her silk glove slipped along her palm as she extended her fingers. But he was gone already, vanished back into the past. As the young couple walked away, it occurred to Minette that there might be others like her, watching the street and keeping it safe. She glanced up at the window again, where Tom had been. Did anyone she saw ever see her back? Just for a moment?

The thought kept her occupied most of the morning. Someday, when she passed on—maybe someone else would watch this street for her. It was a comforting thought. A series of watchers, linked like her pearls across time. Yes. Tom, next to her—and someone else before, and yet another after. Minette smiled.

When Martha arrived, she brought fresh peaches, a tin of sardines, and egg salad. She chattered as she put the salad into a blue dish and brought it out to the porch. "The Society hasn't met yet, but Mrs. Smythe over on Mason Street said she'd have her youngest bring over yesterday's paper each day, so's you can get news."

"Bless you, Martha."

"Aw, twarn't nothing. Glad to help."

"I saw a new young couple," Minette said. "Walking by here."

"Oh? The Hendersons, maybe. Was she tall and sour-faced?"

"No, she was very short, and he as well."

"Oh. Dark-haired, both of them? Him with a big nose like a rooster?"

"Yes. They were arguing."

"Winnie Harrington and that Warner man. Jacob. She lives down on Chisholm. Musta been walking up this way." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He comes from bad blood. Jacob came from Charleston and don't have family connections here. I think he's a drifter. Her pa's forbid the marriage but I think Winnie's got her own

Minette thought about them, long after they'd passed by and the rain began falling. It troubled her that they seemed so unhappy. If only they lived on her street, she could change them.

mind about it. She's a Harrington and I don't have to tell you what that means."

She didn't. Minette remembered the Harrington boys from forty years ago. Harringtons were strong-minded, that was sure—men and women both. "Stephen's daughter, must be," she said.

"Of course. Didn't you know, Miss Minette? She's full on fifteen now."

"I remember when she was born," said Minette, "but I thought she was a little girl still."

Martha looked at her. Finally she said, "I guess you get awful lonely."

"It's not so bad," said Minette. Her left hand twitched. She looked at Martha and saw her—really saw her—no longer sitting in the chair. No matter how Minette looked at her, Martha wasn't there. Alarmed, Minette sat up straight, ignoring her back pain. Would Martha die soon? Before next Tuesday?

Martha said, "So you don't know they're tearin' down the old mansion cross the street."

"No," said Minette, still distracted by what she couldn't see in Martha's chair. "Tearing it down?"

"Yep. Whole thing. Say it's a hazard to the neighborhood boys. They'll go inside. Fall and break their necks. Hmmph. I say boys are boys and they'll climb trees and break their necks that way too. But the town council's set on it. Say no one'll buy it, so it may as well go."

"I suppose," said Minette. "Martha—" She paused. She wanted to say *I'm scared. Don't leave me, Martha. Please don't leave me alone again.*

"Yes?"

"Can you find something for me?" she blurted out. "Town history. Two names. Geoffrey King and Frank Middleman. What happened to them when they left?"

Martha's face grew solemn. "Frank was your fiancé, wasn't he. Mrs. Smythe told me the story."

"So was Geoffrey, five years earlier. I want to know where they went."

"Miss Minette—"

"Please, Martha. I want to know what happened."

Martha said, "I know about Frank. He went to Dahlonega when he left here. I was a little girl then." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He stopped in Atlanta first and brought a ... woman with him. Face painted like a flare. She laughed too loud. My ma wouldn't let me look at her. Three days later they found her dead. He'd run off."

"What?" Minette's fan stopped fluttering. Frank's face appeared in her memory, with his bright blue eyes and playful smile.

"No one told you, Miss Minette? Lawd. Maybe I shouldn'ta."

"No one ever told me," Minette said, flipping her fan shut and open again. Her wrists burned. She remembered her mother consoling her after the broken wedding. She'd asked around about Frank, to see if anyone knew where he'd gone. No one had. But they must have. They had to have known.

"I'm sorry, Miss Minette. I—I'm so sorry. I shouldn'ta told you, maybe."

Minette didn't answer. After a moment, Martha said hesitantly, "I'll ask about Geoffrey." When she left, Minette was rocking silently, looking up at the window where Tom watched her. She wondered if he was changing her life. Fixing her. If so, he was doing a rotten job of it.

By Sunday, it was cooler and cloudy. That night, a storm washed a fresh smell into the gardens and walkways. Miss Minette watched the rain from her porch, encouraging the water to run toward the flowerbeds where it was most needed. She napped for a while, then woke to a twilight drizzle.

Across the way, Tom was still absent. Minette thought about him building the porch for the bride who'd never shown up. He was supposed to have made a lot of money with some mines he owned. People called him crazy, but they probably called her that too. He must have been lonely, with that big house and no one to share it. Minette understood that feeling. Maybe that was a requirement for watching people: you had to be lonely. It was nice to think that she might not have suffered in vain. Still, if Tom was watching her the way she watched these other people—he really could have done a better job with her life. He could have given her a husband, for one thing. And the children she'd always longed for.

On Monday, the rain settled into overcast skies. On Tuesday, it rained again, but gently. Martha came over with an umbrella for herself and a basket for Minette. After chattering about the weather, she busied herself in the kitchen and came back with a small platter of blueberry tarts. Instead of sitting down, she leaned in the doorway. "Mrs. Willowby made 'em for you," she said. "I'd sit and chat, but I can't stay today. Got to organize the raffle for the Society. Money's goin' to the boys on the front."

Minette didn't much like blueberries, but she appreciated the thought. She glanced at Martha's empty chair, wondering why she still couldn't see Martha in it. "Please send my regards to Mrs. Willowby," she said. "Her little boy—a man now, must be?"

"Done been married seven years now," said Martha, resting her head against the oak door frame. "To the Carver girl—Lillian. They live down on Mason Street. She's expectin'."

Minette sighed. "I lose so much track of time," she said. "I forget when it all happens."

"Winnie Harrington eloped with that man. Living here in town still. Her father's angry but didn't throw them out. Says Jacob better treat his daughter right, is all."

Minette smiled. Secretly she envied Winnie's courage. "I think they love each other," she said.

"Time'll tell. And my boy wrote. He's doing fine. Weather's sunny and the trench's not so bad." Martha kept her voice casual, but Minette heard her relief.

"Good, good—and of Geoffrey?"

Martha frowned. "Miss Minette ... it's the past, you know."

"I know."

"Over'n done with. You're here now, and going strong."

"Tell me, Martha."

Martha sighed and shifted on her feet. "I heard from Mrs. Willowby, who heard from Mrs. Tate, who heard from her son in Birmingham ... well, I heard Geoffrey shot himself. September 1859."

Minette's hand twitched on the table.

Martha hurried on. "Gambling debts, they say."

"He was always passionate," said Minette, closing her eyes to grieve. Frank had been a hurried attempt to save herself from spinsterhood, but Geoffrey she had loved. He'd broken her heart when he left. It never quite mended.

"He died penniless, Miss Minette."

"I could have saved him."

Martha shook her head. "Uh-uh, Miss Minette. My cousin Joseph's one a'them gambling types. There's no cure for 'em. They'll bet anything they got."

"If I'd been there ..." She remembered him courting her shy nineteen-year-old self. She'd loved his madcap ways, his antics, his wildness. He wanted to elope, but she insisted on the wedding. A full wedding—and he hadn't shown. All her life, she'd blamed herself for that. If she'd just eloped, maybe he'd be here with her now, sitting in Martha's chair.

"You were better off not marryin' him, you know."

"Martha!"

"Pardon me, Miss Minette, but you know I speak my mind. You were lucky to escape. Just think, you'd be destitute too. He'd a'gambled your house, and your pearls, and everything!"

Minette saw Martha's point. "I could've changed him," she said stubbornly. "He wouldn't have been that way."

"Leopard won't change its spots, Miss Minette."

"Well, it's all in the past now," she said, looking away. "It's done and gone, as you say. I have a future to look at."

"I think you got a guardian angel," said Martha sincerely. "I do. This is a lucky street. Nothing bad happens here."

"I think you're right," said Minette. Her gaze wandered to Tom, alone in his window. He smiled at her, his eyes gentle, and she felt compassion for him. Maybe she couldn't bring him his bride, but he couldn't fix her up either.

On Wednesday morning, Miss Minette watched strangely dressed children play hide-and-go-seek. She spared one child from injury and helped a little boy find a clever hiding place. The other children looked for a long time without finding him until he reappeared. Minette was surprised to see the children jeering at him. Maybe the hiding spot she'd given him was too good. The children chased the boy around the corner.

Troubled, Minette looked at an older couple walking down the tree-lined street, arguing soundlessly about something. The man's back was to her, but the woman looked vaguely familiar. With a start, she realized this was a much-older Winnie Harrington—now Winnie Warner. Curious, Minette studied her face. Winnie looked tired. Her body was stretched out from childbirth, and her gray hair was poorly styled underneath her hat. Jacob had gained nearly a hundred pounds and walked with a limp. Neither of them looked at the other. A dark-haired teenaged girl trailed behind them, her face nearly as tired as her mother's.

Winnie stumbled on something and caught herself. Jacob glared at her. They exchanged sharp words—not more than two sentences—and kept walking. Their daughter acted like nothing had happened at all. Minette saw echoes of their previous argument, dulled by time and familiarity. Her heart ached to see them together like this. What had gone wrong?

Minette thought about them, long after they'd passed by and the rain began falling. It troubled her that they seemed so unhappy. If only they lived on her street, she could change them. She could help them get along again. She wondered if she'd convinced Winnie to elope in the first place. Maybe if she hadn't watched them on her street, they would have broken their engagement. Winnie might have found someone else. There were so many things she couldn't see.

She glanced at Tom's window. He was watching her, watching him. "We aren't very good at this, are we," she said out loud, knowing he couldn't hear her. His expression didn't change. He gazed at her, shifting slightly every few minutes. Minette wondered if she could feel herself being looked at. She closed her eyes, focusing within herself. She thought about Martha's news of Frank and of Geoffrey. She would have been miserable, she knew. As unhappy as Winnie, or maybe anyone else. It was hard to reconcile that understanding with her loneliness.

Everything in her life had brought her to this point. Each choice she'd made—or hadn't—put her here, watching her street. She opened her eyes. The street looked fresh in the rain, like a different place. "Or maybe we are," she said. Tom kept smiling. Minette figured he understood.

Minette rocked on her porch through the evening, looking at the tree where she'd seen the Warners fighting. The tree would grow large. Lightning would take a branch, and the tree would tilt to the right. The tree would fall one day, and block the street for the whole afternoon. Houses would rise, and fall; the street would be torn up one day and put back down.

She couldn't always watch. He was a watcher before her. Was there one to follow? She had no way of knowing. Her string of pearls had a clasp where it connected back to itself. Maybe the watchers were many, or maybe they were only two. Tom had watched her for years, and she had watched him—both doing their best, like anyone would.

She must make a decision. Yes. She makes it.

Across the street, he beckons. Miss Minette stands up. Her body burns with pain, spurring her movement. She clings to the porch railing and stumbles forward. She won't need her chair anymore, nor will Martha sit next to her. There's light ahead of her, and Tom. He smiles.

Slowly she makes her way off the porch onto her front walk. She hasn't stepped on it in five years. Rain pours from the sky and soaks her lace cap. The uneven stones rock her feet like an unsteady ocean. She follows the path, her skirts heavy with water. Each step adds more weight; each step becomes easier. He is watching her, changing her. Youth returns to her joints, stretch returns to her muscles. She looks up to his window, her lined face radiant in the rain.

Minette crosses the paved street as it turns to dirt underfoot. The air smells like new earth. She walks up the stairs to his porch. The century-old wooden steps repair themselves under her feet. The porch returns to the freshness of 1803. Minette places her left hand on the house's door. She glances at her ringless finger and smiles. She pushes the door open and goes inside.

For the next hundred years, and the hundred before that, people live on this street. They climb trees, keep dogs, drink iced tea, and fight with lovers. They are born or dying, get married or get jilted. Life moves like anywhere else, here on the luckiest street in Georgia. ❧

Under the Skin

Our natures often dictate our actions. There is much discussion about whether "often" should read "always."

BY GREG O. WEATHERFORD
ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC WESTBROOK

1. My father the wolf is working late. Typically, he's home before dawn, but this time the sun is staining the roofs of the ranch houses on our street and he's still out.

This worries me—what if someone has trapped him somehow, or, worse, hurt him? He's strong, but his weaknesses are well documented: a stake through the heart, a silver bullet, decapitation. His nature leaves him vulnerable to certain things. He's like most people that way.

I worry every night he is gone, but this time is worse than usual. I can't wait forever—if he doesn't come soon I will be late for school. So I listen to the television talk about nothing.

Finally a thud and a scratch send me rushing to open the back door. My father stumbles in. He's exhausted. His black, heavy fur is smeared with blood, fire truck red and clotted black. He smells of animal and fresh meat. He shuffles on his fours to the fireplace and collapses. As usual after a night's work, he's exhausted—his yellow, slitted eyes are rolling in their sockets. His heavy breath fills the room, his eyes close and he snores.

I lay an old blue blanket over his wolf body. When he awakens, he'll pull his human skin back on; until then I don't want him to be cold. Then I shrug my backpack over my shoulders and rush to school, just as the bell rings for first period.

2. My mother taught me what to do when it happens, when he goes out. Stay quiet, stay alert.

Stay inside. Do not walk into the dark where he can find you. Say nothing to anyone. We are alone in this.

3. We live a twenty-two-minute walk from school, in a little house surrounded by trees. The walk is fine except when it's raining hard. When that happens I wish my father would come pick me up as I walk but he never can. He works hard, he can't just drop everything for me.

This day the sky is clear. When I come through our front door my father is up, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, showered and cheerful. He's making pancakes to the soundtrack of the television—it's always on, all day, all night, the chatter of newscasters and local car ads filling the empty air even when we're out.

"How was your day, kiddo?" The day afterward, he's always nicer to me than usual. He snaps the frying pan upward, flipping a pancake onto a plate he holds in his other hand. He exults: "Ha!"

"It was fine," I say, sitting at the kitchen island. "I had a spelling quiz. Got an A."

"That's my girl," he says. He slides the plate over to me. "Hungry?"

"Thanks." Syrup and melted butter pool on the pancakes.

He sits with his arms on the island and watches me eat. Now and then he sips coffee. My father looks younger than 42. Women watch him walk and raise their eyebrows to each other. His hair is thick and dark and he has bright green eyes and a quick smile.

He doesn't smile now. "Kiddo."

"What?" I know that tone—we're moving again.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"I don't want to leave. I like it here."

"Not that. We're not leaving. I like it here too. I just wanted to see how you'd feel about something."

"Okay." Wary; still eating.

"It's been a while since your mother … went away. And I was wondering, well, how you'd feel if your old man …" He lets the sentence drift away and raises his eyebrows.

"What?" I hate it when he's vague like this. Things ought to be spelled out clearly, like a geometry proof. That way nobody gets hurt.

"Well—if I went out. Dated somebody. That's the word for it, I suppose. Dating."

"Who?"

"Her name is Linda Olansky. She works at the barber shop I started going to. She's really nice. It's just a date. Dinner. A chance to get out a little."

I consider this for several bites until I'm scraping the last of the syrup onto the last shreds of pancake. "You think that's a good idea?"

He regards me carefully. We both know what I mean, but we never talk about the situation—never directly. Finally he says, "Yeah. I do."

"All right then. You're the boss."

"You'll like her. She's pretty great." He gets up and as he collects the dirty dishes he pats me on the shoulder in that awkward dad way, like he's afraid he might touch a bra strap by accident. Though I don't have one—my father hasn't thought to get me a bra. My mother would have.

4. Linda Olansky is tall and slender, with bright pink lipstick and long brown hair as smooth and shiny as an otter's pelt.

When she comes to the door for her first date with Dad she smiles at me and says, "You're Anna. I knew you were smart, but I didn't know you were pretty, too." Her voice is gentle and sweet with a southern lilt. I don't trust her.

She looks around the room. "Are these your books? May I?" Without waiting for my answer she lifts one from the pile next to my seat. "Wow, Anna. Not your typical teen reading."

"Yes. They're mine."

She nods. She ignores my glare.

"Linda!" Dad strides in from the kitchen and takes both her hands in his. "It's so great to see you. You ready?"

Linda Olansky nods and smiles. She has weak little teeth.

Dad kisses me on the cheek. He smells faintly of shaving cream and mint toothpaste. "Be good—the movie is in the player already. Don't wait up."

"I won't. Thanks."

"Goodbye, Anna," Linda Olansky says, putting the book back. "It's nice to meet you."

"Bye." They walk away, my father's hand hovering close to her slender waist and I stand in the door behind them, waving. The sky is moonless, and in the dark I hear car doors whump closed, our car engine whines to a start, tires grind gravel, they're gone.

I hope it doesn't last. I don't like her. She's too phony, too full of artificial sweeteners.

I lock the door from the inside, curl onto the couch with my blankie and click the remote. The local news vanishes and is replaced by *The Poseidon Adventure,* the original. My favorite. I love it when the ship flips over and the passengers have to get through it when it's upside down. The way the world is hanging over their heads and they're crawling on the ceiling. That seems right to me.

Dad wakes me when he picks me up off the couch. I blink into the TV light—some late-night infomercial—as he carries me to my room.

"Night, kiddo," he says, tucking me in. Through the doorway, in the hallway behind him, Linda Olansky lingers like a stain against the light. My father steps into the hallway and closes the door to my bedroom.

"She's asleep," I hear him whisper to Linda Olansky, and I am alone in the dark.

5. A catalogue of me:

Thirteen. Small for my age. Dark in hair and eyes.

I excel in Math, History and Science. I am precise and careful and I dislike sloppiness. At the moment I attend Prince Charles Middle School. I dislike Government but study enough to get As.

I prefer not to talk in class. Also not on the way home, while shopping for food, while in the library, or while looking at (never buying) lipstick and eye shadow in the overlit drugstore on the way home.

I do not own a computer, though my father has one for his stock trading and I use one at school. My favorite movie is *The Poseidon Adventure,* as I have mentioned.

I have lived in six states and fourteen houses. We move to a new house, on average, every 11.3 months.

I am learning French.

I have one father.

I used to have a mother.

6. I was four when I learned about my father, though I didn't understand what I was learning. I woke late one night in a cloud of nightmare—something about claws and blood—and I stumbled half-blind in the dark to my parents' room. I called for them. No answer. I slowly realized the sheets and quilts were empty.

I wandered toward the bathroom, thinking my mother was inside, and stepped into something soft and warm, like a bathrobe someone had just dropped on the way to the shower. I picked it up and in the windowlight I saw what looked like a costume: a mask with an empty, sagging face, two arms flattened and empty, two legs dangling like pants hung to dry. It crinkled wetly in my hands.

Startled, I dropped it back to the floor. Suddenly a pair of hands gripped my shoulders. I thought the costume had stood up from the ground and attacked, and I screamed.

"Hush," my mother said behind me. "It's me, just me."

I fell into her arms, sobbing. I was afraid and confused. She picked the costume up from the floor, folded it tenderly, and placed it on the bed. She held me. She told me my father was working late, that he would be home by daybreak. "Everything will be all right," she said, and I believed her. Remember, I was young and believed everything then.

7. In the next month, my father spends many nights with Linda Olansky. "Got to make hay while I can," he says to me, winking. This is disgusting. He makes me dinner (spaghetti spilled from a can, cold cereal), kisses me goodbye, and goes to be with her.

He comes home late and carries me to bed. I push my face to his neck, breathe in the smell of his skin. Beneath it, I know, his wolf is hiding. I like to think of it in there: the teeth, the fur, the claws. No one else knows about them. Linda Olansky doesn't know.

8. My mother did not want to go. She cried wetly as my father took her away. She grabbed, but couldn't hold me. She wasn't strong. There was nothing inside her.

9. I am walking home. It has been a bad day at school. Daniel Oh, a boy in my Government class, tried to talk to me about socialism. Afterward there had been volleyball, just as unpleasant. Now the sky looks dark and rain-filled.

"Anna!" It is Linda Olansky calling from an open car window. She has pulled her red Beetle car to the curb and she is waving me over. "Would you like a ride?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine," I say.

"Anna, please. I'd love to give you a lift home." Her face has that eager, weak look helpful people get.

"No, I'm fine."

"Anna—" she's about to give up, then comes up with a new idea—"how could I tell your father I just let you go on walking? Please."

I fall into the seat next to her, dropping my book bag on the floorboards with a thunk. The car smells of lemons.

Linda Olansky beams at me. She's always beaming. She's practically a flashlight. "Anna, that's great. I'll just whisk you home in a jiffy."

I don't say anything as she drives. She thinks that if she is nice I will like her, and she thinks that if I do my father will not leave her. Wrong and wrong again.

She lets me out at home. "Here. I thought you'd like this." She hands me a palm-sized book and waves goodbye as she drives away. It's poems—Rimbaud, with the Beardsley illustrations. Despite myself I am impressed.

10. *O Lord, O Celestial Bridegroom, do not turn thy face from the confession of the most pitiful of thy handmaidens. I am lost. I'm drunk. I'm impure. What a life!*

Oh, I am dizzy with words. I am reading this and it is like injecting him into my blood. Now he is alive in me.

11. "Kiddo?"

"Hmm."

"You know what day it is."

Of course I do. We keep our days by a lunar calendar. "Yes."

"Be a good girl and stay in your room tonight. Don't wait up. Don't talk to anyone."

"Be careful."

"Everything will be fine, Anna."

"I know."

I am lying.

12. He is later than last time. I wait until daybreak, then go downstairs. I feel as if I've been holding my breath all night. He returns. After he stumbles to the fireplace and sprawls upon the floor, I spread the blanket over his back. His breath is thick and heavy with the stink of blood. My hand trembles, but I brush the hackles on his thick wolf's neck—his fur ruffles my palm. I will smell of animal until I wash it. In his fur for the first time I see gray hair flecked among the black. My hand pauses; finally I move the blanket over and up until I can't see the gray anymore.

13. " ... and as you can see from our live camera on the scene, county police are investigating thoroughly. Sources tell us, Robin, that they're operating under the theory that this latest fatality is the result of a bear attack, which would be the third bear-related fatality reported in the area this year."

"Thank you, Devandra. Devandra Stephenson, live on the scene. Before this year, no bear attacks had been reported in Prince Charles County since the 18th century, leading many to ask: Is a man-eating bear on the loose? We asked the head of the Prince Charles County Family Zoo that very question. Welcome, James Vanderbill."

"Glad to be here."

"So, Mr. Vanderbill, let's hear it. Bear attacks—a growing problem?"

"Apparently so. Apparently so."

14. Linda Olansky picks me up again. She's been meeting me at that corner for the past couple of days, and by now I just get in when I see the red Beetle. I don't like to admit it, but I look forward to having someone to meet.

At her suggestion we stop by a coffee shop. It's lined with musky books, and as Linda Olansky and I order our drinks I see a newspaper on the counter. The headline is about bear attacks. Linda Olansky shudders. "Awful, isn't it?" she asks the clerk, who shakes her head and agrees. I avoid their eyes.

At a table, Linda Olansky stirs sugar substitute into her decaf latte with a tiny straw. I sip mine straight, the steam hovering in the air in front of us. I'm not sure what to say. We've never sat together anywhere but her car.

"What did you think of the book?"

"The Rimbaud? It's great."

"He was pretty loony, huh? He was like seventeen. Did you know he gave up poetry a couple of years later? Just stopped. Can you imagine just quitting something you've put so much into, that seemed so important? He did. Never wrote another poem. Spent the rest of his life traveling around the world."

"How come you know so much about poetry?"

"I was going to be an English teacher. I had to drop out—no money. My mom had died. Things were tough. You know."

"Yeah." I consider her soft mouth and blinking eyes. In the sunlight she looks almost pretty for a minute. "Does my father know you're picking me up?"

She looks into the circle of her paper coffee cup. "No, Anna. I haven't mentioned it. He seems to keep you on a pretty tight leash."

"My father doesn't like me hanging around people without him. He wouldn't like me talking without him around."

It feels like a betrayal to be talking about him. It's not a betrayal, is it?

"I see. Well, we're not doing anything wrong."

"You don't have to try to be nice to me. My father likes you already."

"Anna! I talk to you because I like talking to you. You think anybody at the hair salon talks about poetry? I'm going crazy trying to pretend I like soap operas."

"Okay." Now I'm confused.

"I don't want to keep anything from your father either. But we're girls, right? And we have our little secrets." She pats my knee, smiling though her eyes stay concerned. "We'll just have our girl time together. We'll keep it between us. For now."

I know all about secrets. I smile. "For now."

15. After coffee she gives me *Huckleberry Finn*. Boring. A few coffee afternoons later comes Dickens, though, which is better: Oliver Twist and his many misfortunes. Fagin. All those motherless orphans, creeping through the fog.

But Rimbaud!

O divin Epoux, mon Seigneur, ne refusez pas la confession de la plus triste de vos servantes. Je suis perdue. Je suis soûle. Je suis impure. Quelle vie!

I mouth the words, tracing them on the page with a finger. Rimbaud Rimbaud Rimbaud. Rahm bow. Beau. A boy, a lovely teenage boy. He was sick with poems. The words like a virus in his blood. A fever. I read them and they spread into me. Now they are in my blood.

One day, Linda Olansky said, he realized he was cured. He spent the rest of his days traveling the world, free.

16. My father is making dinner for Linda Olansky and me. It is our first dinner together, and I am glad she is here, but I don't know what to expect. He is a clumsy cook—all he knows is pancakes—and I worry that steak is too much for him.

He is sitting at the kitchen island talking with us about stock trading. He is very bullish on oil companies right now. In the kitchen the steaks smoke and sizzle blackly on the stovetop grill. He is so involved in describing the world's dwindling reserves that he doesn't notice the thickening stink of smoke until she motions toward the stove with her glass of Chardonnay and says gently, "Steak?"

"Christ!" He leaps up and tries to stab the meat with a kitchen fork, but jabs too hard and pushes the first one off the grill. It flops to the ground. He snarls. As he waves the smoke away to see better a jet of grease flares up, yellow-red. Desperately, he grabs the next steak with his bare hands, yelps in surprise as it burns his fingers and tosses it across the kitchen into the sink. He turns off the range burner and the fire goes out. Hands on hips, he examines the last blistered steak on the grill, now curled into a blackened comma.

Linda Olansky puts her wine glass down and lays her face on her crossed arms. Her shoulders shake and after a moment she looks up at me, her lips tight to keep in the laughter.

I try to hide my smile in my cup of Sprite but a gust of laughter bursts out so fast I almost spray it out my nose. At that, Linda Olansky can't stop herself from laughing out loud—she has a big, unexpected belly laugh—and that gives me permission to laugh too, and we howl and giggle together.

It's been a long time since I have laughed this loudly.

After a minute, I wipe my eyes with a paper napkin and look at the kitchen. My father is running water over the residue of dinner and scraping it into the garbage disposal. He is not smiling. He snaps a switch and the disposal begins grinding, digesting the meat and sending it down the pipe.

He comes to Linda Olansky and helps her out of her chair. He says, "So much for that. Let's go out. Anna, the movie's in the machine. Don't wait up."

Linda Olansky shakes her head and smiles. "Why don't we bring Anna this time?"

My father is wordless—I can tell he can't believe she would suggest something different.

"No, that's okay," I say quickly. "I hate restaurants."

"Let's go eat, Linda. She's fine."

"Oh, come on. We don't have to miss having dinner all together, do we?"

"Linda. Let's go." He puts on his jacket. "She's fine."

"I'm fine," I say. "I can make some soup or something."

She chews her bottom lip for second and doesn't look at him. "Actually, I'm not feeling up to dinner anymore. I think I might be coming down with something. I'm sorry. Would you mind taking me home?"

My father nods. They leave together in silence.

I put dishes in the dishwasher and open windows to release the greasy smoke that thickens the air. Dinner is over.

17. The next day I look up from lunch (beefaroni, peas) to see Daniel Oh placing his orange fiberglass lunch tray at the seat next to mine. He sits cautiously.

"Anna, is this cool? Me being here?" He pushes his glasses up with his middle finger.

I consider him (black-framed glasses, thick bangs, cinnamon skin) for so long he starts to get up again. "Sure," I say at last. "Why not?"

18. After school Linda Olansky picks me up. "How was today? Did you have that vocabulary test?"

"It was perspicacious," I say. "No problem. I was practically perambulatory."

She laughs. "You're quite a word person, aren't you?"

"I thought I was feeling a bit pugnacious myself."

"Listen. I'm sorry we didn't have dinner yesterday. I didn't feel that great—the smoke got to me, I guess. I'm better now. We'll try again, okay? And Anna? This time I'll cook."

"That would be great."

"Anna." She leans toward me. "Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Like what?"

"Anything at all. Anything wrong at school? At home?"

"No, nothing." She knows. No, she can't know.

She's still looking at me. "When I was a little older than you, I used to have a friend, Anna, who had a secret. Her mother used to be very mean to her. She never told anyone until later. She should have."

"I don't have a mother."

"Oh, Anna, I know. I'm sorry—I just mean that sometimes people don't say what's bothering them until …" She doesn't finish. I wonder what happened to her friend. Nothing good, I guess.

I shake my head again. "There isn't anything wrong."

"Okay. If there ever is, you tell me."

"I will."

She drops me off a block from home. When I unlock the front door my father is waiting at the kitchen table. His face is clenched and angry. "What have you told her? And don't lie. I saw you getting in her car on Mulberry."

"She just gave me a ride." As I shrug off my book bag I can feel my heart in my throat. Funny, I always thought that was one of those sayings—but there it is, choking my throat like cotton.

"You kept this from me? You didn't tell me? What have you told her? Don't lie." He is not shouting. Even worse, he's talking very quietly and he's moving closer to me.

"Nothing. I haven't said anything."

"How many times?"

"Not many."

"How—many—times?" Very evenly. He's a foot away. Inside him the wolf, jaws gaping.

"Six. Seven, maybe. Daddy, I'm sorry—"

"You know we can't talk to them, to anyone. You know we can't. But you did. You did, Anna! What did you tell her? How much?"

"Nothing! Nothing!"

"Do you want me to be taken away? Killed? Dissected? Is that what you want?" He takes my left forearm in his big right hand and holds it so I can't move. He keeps speaking evenly: "Haven't I taken care of you? Don't I give you everything? Why would you do this, Anna? Why would you go behind my back like this? Deceive me?"

"I don't know, I don't know."

He is holding my arm hard so I can see my skin bulging between his fingers. My eyes water and I can't help gasping.

He's reminding me of what he can do. What he has done. I think of what he can do to Linda Olansky—treat her like the others, like meat.

The thought terrifies me and I start to babble, eyes closed. Tears streak my face. I can hardly speak, the sobs are choking the words into silence. "Please, Daddy! She doesn't know anything! We just talk about, about poems. Books. That's all. You have to believe me, Daddy. Don't you believe me?"

"That's what this is about? Poetry?" He loosens his grip, puzzled.

"Yes!"

"Not—anything else?"

"No."

"Kiddo." He sighs deeply and pulls me into an embrace. "Oh, kiddo. I just can't believe you didn't tell me. You should always tell me. You know how worried I get."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." I'm sobbing into his shirt, the snot and tears wetting it.

"Don't do it anymore."

"I won't. I'll tell you everything."

"You know," he strokes my hair, "you know you can't see her anymore. It's too dangerous. I'll tell her it's over. I'll tell her I won't be with her either. See what I'm giving up for you? I'm giving her up. It's for our safety. Yours. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes," I say, and I know he wants us to be alone forever and I go on sobbing until I'm empty again.

19. "Anna! Anna!"

I keep walking, shrugging the backpack higher against my vulnerable neck.

"Anna, please! What happened? What did I do? Please tell me."

She drives the red Beetle slowly along the road, window rolled down so she can talk to me. "I understand your father not wanting to go out with me, Anna. But I don't know why you won't talk to me. Something's wrong, isn't it? What is going on? Please tell me."

Not a word from me. If I speak, he will know.

"Oh, Anna! Please! You promised to tell me if something was wrong. Remember? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

I say nothing.

"Please, please look at me, Anna. At least look at me."

I weaken, and look. Her eyes are reddened and puffy, her face slack with grief and worry and confusion. She gazes back at me and I almost falter.

But then I find a cold, hard thing inside me and I tighten my lips.

"Go away," I tell her. "Leave us alone."

It's for the best.

20. "Anna, hey, is this still cool with you? That I sit here? What's wrong? Anna? Hey, where are you going?"

21. On my doorstep I find a package wrapped in brown paper. *Moby Dick.*

22. My mother loved my father. She must have loved him just as he was, the way I do. She knew him, knew what he was, and she chose to be with him. She could have left—by herself, or with me. But she didn't, not for a long time. She stayed because she loved him. She must have loved him. Why else would she stay? Who would she protect?

I am in my bed, and the cold round moon shines in my window. I feel something stirring inside my skin. I think I know what it is.

23. The night my mother went away my father was out. The moon was fat in the black sky. She lifted me from my bed, I remember her powdery smell, and took me into the living room. I curled on the couch, sleepy and blinking.

She picked something up from the floor—it was my father's human skin, I realized—and pushed it into the fireplace.

We were never supposed to move it. I screamed. "Mommy! Why are you doing that?"

"Hush! Hush, baby!" I can still remember the way her eyes were wide. I had never seen a grown-up frightened before. "We're going to go for a little ride, okay? Just a little ride."

"What will Daddy do?"

"He'll be with us later, baby. Don't worry. But be quiet, okay? We don't want to wake anyone up. Shh."

"Okay."

She pulled out a rattling matchbox and pushed some of the twigs we kept nearby into the fireplace. She tried to light a fire but she kept dropping the matches. "Jesus, Jesus," she said. "Please, oh please." Dropping some more. I didn't know yet why she was praying.

After a while she threw the matches down on the floor and ran to pick me up. "We have to go, baby. We have to go now."

"I want to give Daddy a kiss." I started to cry.

"Please, baby, please." Then she stopped talking.

I smelled the heavy animal smell and I looked up. "Daddy!"

And that was the end of that.

24. The moon comes again, full and pregnant and round. I curl in my bed. The door is locked, as always. On these nights, I remember my mother's warnings. Outside, nothing is around you, nothing can stop him if the blood is in him and he sees you. He slips into the shadows and behind the lampposts and you turn around and he is on you.

Before, my mother would lie next to me on these nights, stroking my hair. Now I read the books Linda Olansky has given me. I turn the pages, each sheet like skin. So full of life. So easily torn.

He will hurt her.

I feel it moving inside. The moon is calling it.

These are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it.

Melville was a sailor. He knew about the depths of the ocean, how dark it gets, how cold.

25. "... with yet another fatal wild animal attack, this time on an elderly man, authorities say they now are bringing specialists in from Alaska to Prince Charles to assist in the investigation. Back to you, Robin".

"Thank you, Devandra. This just defies belief, doesn't it? Next up, Alan with the weather."

26. The lunar calendar says it's time for my father to spend another night out. It has been a long wait, this month between moons. I have smiled at him, come home on time, kept my mouth closed.

All that time I have thought about my mother in secret.

This moontime I don't stay in my room when the sun drifts downward. As the dark rises, I creep to the top of the stairs and I wait.

I hear my father moving. After a time the footsteps get slower. He shuffles into view at the foot of the stairs, and I hide. I'm not supposed to see this. He groans and falls to his knees. It hurts. Then he reaches up and puts both hands to his mouth, slips the fingers inside and pulls.

He opens like a banana peel, like a pupa, and the wolf steps out of the skin, black fur bristling, alive, alive, alive. This is who he is, not the man he hides inside—this is his body. He spins and snaps his jaws at the air—it sounds like a trap clapping shut—and revels in its wildness.

The wolf who is my father leaps through a window and out of sight.

I wait at the top of the stairs and when I can't wait any longer I run down and I gather up his human skin. The oblivious television glows blue and natters about headaches. I ball the skin into a saggy bundle and shove it into a paper grocery bag. I run to the door and instead of locking it I peer out—don't see him—and I run into the dark.

Outside, I race along the sidewalk among the streetlights, my breath ragged and misting. This is the first time I have left our house on these nights, and it makes my skin feel open, stripped naked. My body is so easily broken, I am so small, my thin skin covers only blood and muscle and can be torn.

As my feet pound down the blocks my eyes leap from side to side, looking for him. I hear something shuffling inside the shadows that hide behind lampposts. I wait for the hot breath on my back and I try not to look behind me. I can hope only that he is not behind me, closing in on silent paws.

Please, oh please.

Would he pity me, leave me alive? He would not.

I come to a little house with a red Beetle parked in front and I bang on the door.

From inside rises Linda Olansky's voice: "What is it?" A lamp flashes on above me and I can sense someone looking through the peephole. "Anna? What in the world—"

A lock clicks and the door opens. She pulls me inside. "What are you doing out so late? What's wrong?"

I can't talk. My mouth is dry with terror at what I have done, at what I am doing. All I can do is hold out the bag that holds his human skin. She looks at it, bewildered. She doesn't know that

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The Horned Toad in the Hubcap

The marvelous Sprokly returns and shows us once again that you needn't be made of flesh and blood to have a heart.

"What's wrong, Walter?" The wooden girl sat down beside me. Her words sounded distant, as if they couldn't break through the hot afternoon stillness. Yet I saw them floating in the dusk as golden sunbeams slanted through the cracks of the loft. Glowing, misty words that drifted between me and my hubcap as it flipped lazily down into my hands.

I put on one of Pa's frowns, stretching my mouth down and narrowing my eyebrows. That should make her leave me alone. Never taking my gaze from the thorn-headed black-eyed vision in the hubcap, I flipped it into the air again, end over end, over end.

BY JOE MURPHY ❧ ILLUSTRATION BY LORI KOEFOED

"Walter!" Sunbeam words appeared in the gloom once more. "Your Ma said you were upset. She wanted me to talk to you."

Down the hubcap tumbled into my hands. This time I tried one of Ma's sighs, slumping my shoulders and easing out my breath. The strange image in the hubcap remained, so I flipped it again.

Ma and Pa called her The Wooden Girl when she wasn't around but her name was Sprokly. She reached out, drew a squiggly circle on the dusty barn floor, and whispered something deliberately too soft for me to hear. The hubcap halted in midair.

"Walter," she said in her ever-so-patient voice.

I was glad she did it really. I had a lot of words in my head, but only a few knew how to come out my mouth. It's a syndrome kind of thing. That's what the Doctors in Dallas and Wichita Falls told us, but they used an awful lot of words. They made Ma cry and Pa, he just balled his fists, made the worst frown ever, and took us home.

So I reached over and put my fingers on Sprokly's wooden cheek, just above the hinge of her jaw. Then I turned her face so that she could see into the shiny bowl of the hubcap.

"What?" I asked, pointing at the thorny image with my other hand.

Sprokly poked her head forward, gazing at the hubcap. She blinked three times, her eyelids going up and down like window shades.

"That's a horned toad," Sprokly said.

"Horned t-toad," I repeated.

"Horned toad."

"Horned toad, horned toad, horned toad." Good, those words knew how to come out my mouth now. I reached up, put my fingers on the hubcap, and it dropped into my hands. "Watch now, Sprokly. Watch." Sprokly nodded and put her hands in her lap. I flipped the hubcap into the air again. End over end over end and I caught it. "Look."

Sprokly leaned over, one hand now on the loft floor; careful not to touch me because she knew I didn't like being touched. "That's the same horned toad again."

"Two hundred." I spread my hands the way she does when she's explaining something important. "Two hundred, five hundred, a million, billion."

"Every time?" Sprokly frowned. Her frowns were smaller than Pa's, maybe because her lips were wood.

"Every time."

"The same one?"

"Same one."

"That's why you're upset?"

"Upset." I folded my arms the way Ma did when that coyote got in the hen house. "It should change. Every time it should change."

It had always changed before. I didn't know where the hubcap came from, certainly not from Pa's rusty truck. I found it on our porch thirteen years, four months, and twenty-six days ago when I was three. I picked it up and saw stars all hazed with glowing green clouds, a sky that wasn't ours. From then on, with every flip a new place appeared—sometimes even planets or stars that glimmered with comets and lights. Dallas was a horror of crowds. Wichita Falls a terror of tests and needles. But within the hubcap, peaceful beautiful places that made me ache inside.

"That's very odd, Walter." Sprokly rubbed her jaw. I saw her Grampser do that once, when he was thinking hard. Sprokly's a lot like her Grampser because he made her. Only Grampser wasn't wood. She held out her hands. "Can I try?"

"Try." I let her ease the hubcap from my fingers. I knew she'd give it back. Sprokly's my only friend. Last summer she ran away from her Grampser and wandered onto our farm. Pa and Ma let her stay the night. After they went to bed, she gave me all my words. She wrote them on my skin with moonlight. It took a couple days for them to sink in. Pa was mad at first, but you should have seen his grin when words started coming out my mouth.

Sprokly flipped the hubcap. It went too high, almost hitting the roof of the loft. I cringed; my hubcap was perfectly round, perfectly curved, a chrome-covered bowl. A dent would have spoiled its perfection and ruined the beautiful places inside. Sprokly's not very good with hubcaps. I couldn't help reaching for it, but she caught it first. I used one of her sighs, and then we both looked.

"Horned toad," I told her. "Every time."

"That must mean it's important." Sprokly returned the hubcap and I clutched it to my chest. "No wonder you're upset, Walter. I'm glad your Ma called me."

"Glad too." I used Sprokly's smile and she giggled. "Make it go away."

"It won't go away until we find it." Sprokly climbed to her feet and motioned me up. I didn't want to. I wanted to go on watching the beautiful places in the hubcap. But I was tired of seeing the horned toad and if Sprokly said it wouldn't go away, then it probably wouldn't. I got up. We climbed down the ladder, squeezed past the hay bales, and out into the glaring Texas sun.

"How do we f-find it?" I asked, blinking the brightness from my eyes.

"Well, they're all over the place." Sprokly spread her hands.

"Not the house," I told her. "Ma would have a fit."

"True." Sprokly cocked her head toward the white box of our house. "We'll go look for it, though." She started for the house. Chickens fussed and fluttered in the dust, squawking out of our way.

"In the house?"

"You should ask your Ma first."

"You don't always ask. Sometimes you run away," I reminded her.

"But thanks to your folks, I don't do that anymore." Sprokly shook her head. "I asked Grampser before I came over today."

We went in the back door but Ma wasn't inside so we came out the front. She was over by the clothes line hanging up three of Pa's shirts, two of her dresses, and two pairs of my jeans. She took a clothespin out of her mouth. "I see you found him."

"Yes, Ma'am." Sprokly looked at me. I knew what she wanted but

Laughs don't know how to

not words, and everyone

Besides, I could never

People seem to like laughs.

I didn't want to do it. Ma knew too and folded her arms, waiting. We all waited. I was very good at waiting but Ma was better, and Sprokly could wait the sun right out of the sky. So we all waited some more, Sprokly and Ma just looked at me until I remembered the hubcap as it was tucked under my arm. I wanted my beautiful places back, and since the horned toad wouldn't leave, I knew it was my problem. I gave up.

"M-Ma," I said, carefully as I could. "Can Sprokly and I go for a w-walk?"

Ma grew one of her big, big smiles and the wrinkles around her eyes disappeared. That meant she was happy, very happy. "Be back by dark, Walter." But then she turned to Sprokly. "Thank you, dear."

Sprokly smiled big too. "I'll take good care of him, Mrs. Parker. We're going down to the river. We might go wading if Walter wants to."

"Take off your shoes if you do," Ma said to me.

"Shoes off," I agreed. I started toward the river then, but Sprokly didn't follow. I had to turn around and there they were, still waiting. Why don't they ever get tired of waiting for me to do the right thing?

"Bye," I said, but I used one of Ma's sighs. I don't know why they laughed, but they did. Sprokly came over to me while Ma went back to hanging clothes.

We started through the chaparral, threading between tangled knots

of mesquite trees and big green clumps of prickly pears. Grasshoppers flew around and once a quail took wing.

"Horned toads live in rivers?" I asked.

When Sprokly shook her head her neck squeaked. Her knee squeaked too, she was always having trouble with it. I wished her Grampser would get around to making her a new one but he hadn't because they weren't on good terms right now. "We should come across some by the time we get there."

"What then?"

"Wait and see," Sprokly said and smiled. I tried one of my own smiles then and she laughed.

Laughs don't know how to come out my mouth. They're not words, and everyone makes them differently. Besides, I never could figure out what they mean. People seem to like laughs. I liked walking and I liked Sprokly. Since I couldn't laugh I held out my hand. Sprokly took it and made another laugh. Now if we could just get the horned toad out of my hubcap.

The Red River looked like a silver snake curling and crawling over big muddy sand flats. We stepped out of the chaparral and a hundred and forty-six horned toads surrounded us. This time I put on Pa's scowl, the face he used when the Bow Tie Man tried to take back our truck. "Not the one in the hubcap," I told Sprokly.

Which was true. The one in the hubcap was brown with lighter brown spots and black shiny eyes. The ones around us now were the size and shape of pancakes and black with red eyes. They smelled bad too, like diesel oil and fertilizer.

The biggest horned toad scrambled up on a rock and glared at us. "Girl, does He know you're out here?"

Sprokly put her hands on her hips and glared back. "Course Grampser knows. I asked him before I went a-visiting. Not that it's any of your business."

"This stretch of river belongs to us." The horned toad narrowed its body and lifted itself higher on its front legs. "That makes it our business."

"You tell her, Lucas!" One of the others shouted and the rest started muttering.

Sprokly stepped back, one hand going to her mouth. "You've got a name?"

"That's right," the horned toad said. "He Who Made Us All named me just a few days ago. I'm Lucas now, and your Grampser said I can do whatever I want, long as we stay near this part of the river." It puffed up until it was big as my fist.

Sprokly glanced at me and then squatted down in front of Lucas. "Grampser must think a lot of you, Lucas. You're pretty important."

"Darn tootin, I am." Lucas bobbed his thorny head.

"Maybe you can help us." Sprokly wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Mayyyybeeee," Lucas allowed.

"We're looking for a real horned toad."

"What you think we are?" Lucas rasped. "Chopped barbecue?"

"You know what I mean," Sprokly poked a finger at him. "Grampser and Pa made you all. I know 'cause I was there and I helped. What we're wanting is the kind that was born out here."

"They's gone now." Lucas puffed up again, glancing at the others. "We got rid of them."

"What?"

"That's right, girl. Broke their eggs and chased the rest away. Ate the slow ones. You won't find any this side of Highway 287."

Sprokly jumped to her feet. I couldn't figure the expression on her face. Her eyebrows slashed down like she was mad, but her mouth was a rounded O-shape. "And Grampser said you could do this?"

"Didn't say we couldn't. Said we could do what we wanted, long as we bring him things when he needs them."

"What kind of things?" Sprokly demanded.

Lucas rasped a really loud and long rasp and the others took it up. Sounded like sand paper on sheet metal. I wanted to cover my ears but I would have had to put down my hubcap.

"Don't laugh at me," Sprokly warned.

"Then ask him yourself, girl." Lucas turned away from us, kind of rude-like and scampered off the rock. The others followed; they zigzagged over the sand and disappeared into the chaparral.

"All the way to the highway." Sprokly stared at me.

"Far away," I told her.

"Eight and a half miles from your house." Sprokly nodded. "That means they've chased the real horned toads off our property and yours too. Maybe a few other places." She shook her head, turned and started along the river bed, moving where the sand was dry and hard. I looked down at my hubcap. The same image, a real horned toad stared back. I still wanted my beautiful places so I tucked the hubcap under my arm and followed.

"Grampser's doing it again," Sprokly muttered; her arms folded as she stomped across the sand.

"Doing what?" I asked, hurrying to catch up.

"Messing with stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Oh, Walter, you wouldn't understand."

"I understand." I held out my hubcap, showed her the horned toad again. "This ain't right."

"It ain't." Sprokly stopped and I almost bumped into her. She scratched at the finely carved strands of her hair and stared at her dusty penny loafers. Finally she turned to me and spread her hands. "Your hubcap ain't right, because whatever Grampser's doing ain't right. I hate it when he starts this ... this ... shit."

Sprokly had cussed! I knew what cussing meant. Pa did it when he got real mad, and then Ma got mad 'cause he did it. I tried it once when they took my hubcap and got my mouth washed out with soap. My throat tightened just thinking about it and a queasy feeling started deep in my stomach.

"Sprokly." My voice grew quiet but I know she heard. I touched her arm just to make sure. "Don't run away again."

Sprokly sighed and shook her head. Something glimmered on her cheek. At first I thought it was a tear, but then, only the gleam of the setting sun on polished wood. Before I could say anything, she tumbled down, crumpled up on the sand with her hands over her face. Her body shuddered as she sucked in a breath. I'd never seen her do this before, but I'd seen Ma do it plenty. It's called crying.

I sat down beside her. My hands gripped the hubcap, but the horned toad was still there. Pa always did the same thing when Ma got like this. It worked more often than not. I put down the hubcap and flattened my hand on her shoulder. She trembled.

"Don't cry," I whispered, and patted her. "Remember, darlin', we all care about you."

After a long time she looked up at me. Her cheeks really were wet this time. Something in her eyes was different now. I had a lot of words in my head but none of them seemed to fit.

"Darlin'?" But she pushed away my hand, sat up, and sniffed. "You got a way with words, you know that? But listen, 287's too far to walk."

"The hubcap ..."

"I know, I know." She lifted a hand so I shut up. "We need a truck to get that far."

"Pa's got a truck. But he's in town."

"Grampser's got a truck too." Sprokly's wooden lips spread. That should have meant a smile, but she didn't look happy.

"We could use it?"

Sprokly climbed to her feet. She stuck out her hand and helped me up. The noise that came out her mouth didn't sound like a laugh, more like that rasp Lucas had made. "Well, we could steal it."

Sprokly's farm wasn't like our farm. The Maezel family lived in a ghost town with lots of unpainted crumbling buildings and tumbleweeds. Her Grampser had named the place Waxacholie-Nazarene. As we went down Eisenhower Street, we passed a herd of cows. They weren't like our cows either; theirs were made of wood.

We turned the corner and I saw something—children, younger

than us, in bright frilly dresses and pigtails. They all looked alike and were skipping around a motionless man who held a hoe on his shoulder. One of them threw a rock. It hit the man square in the head but he still didn't move.

"Stop it!" Sprokly shouted. I didn't want to go closer but Sprokly balled her fists and rushed forward. I couldn't let her go alone, a friend wouldn't do that. So I followed and realized the children were wooden too. They wore big frowns, too big for a real person's face. I tried to scrunch my mouth down like they did and ended up grinding my teeth. One girl stamped a foot, raising dust. Another threw a rock that went right over my head.

"I. Said. Stop!" Sprokly wrote the words right onto the air with a finger. They glowed red, then brightened like hot iron. Their heat made me step back.

"We're just playing," a wooden girl wailed. "Why won't you let us play, Sprokly?"

"It's not a fair game." Sprokly put her fists on her hips. "Jacob here can't defend himself." She lifted her hands then and pushed. The red hot words spread out, becoming little steamy clouds that swerved around the motionless Jacob and drifted toward the girls. "Go on now; go kill a snake or something."

"Snake game!" A little girl shrieked. They dashed off, giggling, into a tumbled-down storefront. The last one turned in the doorway. "You didn't wind him up this morning, Sprokly. You didn't do your chores and we're gonna tell." She stuck out a square tongue then vanished inside.

"Who?" I asked Sprokly.

"They're just the Cousins," Sprokly sighed. "Some of the first people Grampser made but they come out too hateful."

"Do they like horned toads?" I asked.

Sprokly shook her head, "They don't like nothing, but they're good for trespassers." She turned to the wooden man then, pulling a big shiny key from her dress pocket. "And poor Jacob here came out too dumb to wind himself up." She stuck the key in Jacob's back and turned it eighty-three times.

The wooden man jerked, then blinked at us. "Evening Miss Sprokly, Ma'am."

"Good evening, Jacob." Sprokly lifted a finger in warning. "Mind the Cousins; they're on the prowl again."

Jacob's painted smile somehow grew so broad that it made my cheeks hurt. "That's what this here hoe is for." He ambled away then, just as if nothing had happened.

"Hurt?" I thought to ask.

But Sprokly shook her head. "No, once they run down they don't feel anything. But my backsides will be hurting when Grampser finds out I didn't finish my chores."

Sprokly's farm wasn't like ours and their cows weren't like ours, but Sprokly's house was pretty much like ours. It was white, the paint worn thin to the wood in places, and inside it was clean. Spidery coverings that Ma called antimacassars draped the chairs and sofa. Sprokly's Ma made them just like my Ma made ours. Sprokly's Ma was short and wide. Her hair was dark, tinged blue, and curly. Around her throat she wore a pendant that glowed. She made a big smile when we came in.

"Evening, Walter." Sprokly's Ma went to the sink and pumped a big pitcher full of cold, clear water. "It's good to see you again." She took down three glasses from the cupboard and filled them.

"Yes, ma'am," I managed. Sprokly's Ma sat down at the kitchen table and motioned us over. I sat down too. Sprokly didn't so her Ma and I turned and looked at her, waiting. Sprokly's Ma was good at waiting too so this didn't take long. Finally Sprokly pulled up a chair, scooted it in place, then drank half her water in a single gulp.

"So what are you young-uns up to?" Sprokly's Ma asked after a sip.

"A horned toad's stuck in m-my hubcap," I told her. "We're stealing Grampser's truck."

Sprokly sputtered water all over the table. Her Ma reached over and patted Sprokly's back as she coughed. Sprokly's scowl was almost as harsh as my Pa's. I don't know why she looked at me that way. I'd said what needed to be said and we hadn't had to wait around.

"Well." Sprokly's Ma leaned back, reached for a dish towel on the counter, and handed it to Sprokly. "Where were you young-uns aiming to go in this here stolen truck?"

"The highway," I said.

Sprokly scowled and wiped up the water on the table. "Grampser's at it again," she said and told her Ma about the black horned toads at the river.

Sprokly's Ma laced her thick fingers on the table, cocked her head for a moment, and then gazed at Sprokly. "You know, dear, that I don't always hold with your Grampser's experiments ..."

"But you never try to stop him," Sprokly snapped.

"Child, neither of us would be here otherwise." She reached out to stroke Sprokly's cheek but Sprokly jerked away.

"He's killing them off!" Sprokly banged a wooden fist down on the table, making our glasses jump. "He knows that's wrong." She looked up at her Ma and her eyes got wet again. "Life's too hard to create just to throw it away on useless old experiments."

Her Ma sighed and stared at the table. "I guess if anyone knowed that it would be you." She reached over, eased the dishrag from Sprokly's fingers, and then took it to the sink. "But give him a chance. He's your only Grampser and you know he loves you with all his heart. Talk to him. He and Pa are down in the workshop. Besides, you're old enough. He might just lend you the truck if you asked."

Sprokly frowned, drank the rest of her water, and finally nodded. She got up, never looking at her Ma, took my glass and hers, and set them in the sink. "I guess that's what we'll have to do." She poked me in the shoulder. "Come on, tattle-tale."

"Tattle-tale?" I asked as I followed her out. "What's that mean?"

"You don't know?" She stopped to stare at me.

"Not in my head."

"Never mind." She took my hand. "Let's go."

"That's the workshop?" I asked, pointing to a big unpainted barn.

"Yes it is." But she pulled me toward a rusty red truck instead.

"Wrong way." I started to pull back but Sprokly kept hold of my hand. When we reached the truck she stopped and put her hands on her hips.

"Grampser never tells the truth." Her voice grew harsh and she folded her arms. "If we listen to him, Walter, we won't find out anything, and we'll never get the horned toad out of your hubcap. Now, are we gonna take the truck like we planned, or do you want to waste time while Grampser tells us a tall one?"

"Stealing." But then I looked into my hubcap. The horned toad was still there, all right. I looked up then, back at Sprokly's house to see if her Ma was watching, then over at the workshop.

"We can't wait all day," Sprokly muttered.

"Stealing." I didn't look at Sprokly. I didn't look at the hubcap. Ma and Pa didn't hold with stealing. The word went with lying. Bad things. I put on Pa's frown, then tried out his voice. "Ain't nothing worse than a thief 'cept a liar."

Sprokly looked at the ground. I smiled; this time I had to wait for her to do the right thing.

"Okay, Walter." She made the biggest sigh I'd ever seen. "You win. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Why?"

"Just come on." Sprokly straightened up and marched toward the workshop. I followed, of course. But not before I saw the curtain move on the kitchen window. Sprokly's Ma smiled and disappeared.

It was hot outside but cool in the workshop. Words and letters I didn't know hung in sunbeams, shifting into symbols and strange wriggling squiggles. Tools and sawhorses, big tables with piles of cogs and one had a mountain of broken glass that gleamed and grew dark again, gleamed and grew dark.

Sprokly's Pa was short, dark, and had the biggest arms I've ever seen. Grampser was taller, gray-haired, and Pa would have told him to shave. Both sat beside a long work table. Both looked up.

Sprokly's hand rose to cover her mouth. Her eyes grew bigger. Her

Pa smiled, but Grampser only cocked his head and waited. I didn't know what we were waiting for this time. But the quiet, there was something scary in it.

"Well, girl?" Grampser stood and put his hands on his hips.

Sprokly shook her head. Her mouth opened and then closed. Her head shook once more and finally, finally she said, "You're doing it again."

Grampser looked down at what was on the worktable. I looked too. I saw a body, but it wasn't like mine. It was made of wood, like Sprokly but smaller and unfinished. Cogs, ratchets, springs, and pulleys filled its inside. No eyes in the head, but finely carved hair. Long hair, like a girl's, like Sprokly's.

"Is that supposed to be me?" Sprokly's voice had a choking tightness I'd never heard before.

"No, dear." Her Pa stood so quickly that his stool fell over. It clattered like thunder in the silence. "She'll be your sister."

"But why?" Tears leaked from Sprokly's eyes. Her hands spread, not explaining, but pleading. "I thought that what happened to me ..."

"Girl, we've been over this so many times it ain't even funny," Grampser said, "I tried to give you Life ..."

"You tried to steal Life from those people in Quanah!" Sprokly aimed a trembling finger at him. "And put it in me."

"You refused," Grampser said, an angry growl to his voice.

"Grampser," her Pa said. "Let's not ..."

Grampser waved him to silence but his hand trembled. A tear threaded through his whiskers. "You did what you had to, girl. Now I'm doing what I have to. I got to keep trying until I get it right."

"Grampser!" Her Pa's voice took a sharp edge. "That's not ..."

Sprokly screamed. I jumped away from her, almost dropping my hubcap, the sound was so loud. She turned and ran, bursting through the workshop door so hard one of the hinges flew off. Grampser and her Pa stared after her. They looked at me then, her Pa with a frown, but Grampser, he had a scowl worse than my Pa's the day we left the Doctors in Dallas. Looks can make you feel good or bad. Grampser's made me run.

Sprokly had reached the truck by the time I caught up to her. She opened the door, got in, and slammed it. My Pa was wrong. Some things are worse than stealing and lying. I got in the truck too, gasping, sweat burning my eyes. I got in because if I hadn't, I'd have been something worse than a thief and liar. At first I couldn't figure a word for it. But it finally came—I'd be alone.

Sprokly traced something on the shiny blank space where the spokes of the steering wheel met.

"Drive," she cried out, and the truck started.

We bumped along a road that weren't much more than a cow path. The sun had gone red and almost reached the ground. I was starting to worry that we might not get home by dark. Ma would be mad then, mad enough to take my hubcap. Sprokly drove silently; her wooden fingers clenched the wheel. She had a frown almost like the one the Cousins wore.

I decided I should remind Sprokly that I had to be home by dark but the radio came on all by itself. Ernest Tubb blasted through the speaker and we both jumped. The music faded away.

"Girl, what do you think you're doing?" The voice was Grampser's.

"Same thing you are," Sprokly sneered. "Just exactly what I have to."

"I didn't mean for things to go like they did," Grampser said. "Come on back now. We need to talk."

"You'll kill off the horned toads," Sprokly said. "That's where you'll get the life for my ... my sister."

"Are you talking about Lucas and his bunch?" Grampser's sigh was clear even through the radio. "It's not that way at all, girl. He's just doing what animals do. The strong make a place at the weaker's expense."

"You named him!" Sprokly shouted and thumped the dashboard. "You gave him the power."

"Because I need him to do things. Honestly girl, they're just tools. I don't know why you care so much."

"Why won't you listen?" Sprokly demanded. "It's wrong. That's all there is to it."

Grampser's sigh grew even louder this time, almost like a wind blowing around the truck. "I think it's time for you to come home."

The truck slowly pulled to a stop. Sprokly stared at the steering wheel, then traced a figure on it again. "Drive!"

"Sure thing, girl," Grampser chuckled. The truck started, but went into reverse. The steering wheel jerked in Sprokly's hands and we went bumping down the cow path only backward.

Sprokly slammed a fist against the dashboard and the radio just laughed. She glared at me then, her eyes narrow, the set of her wooden jaw harsh. She punched the seat between us.

"Jump out?" I said.

That made Sprokly smile. "I will if you will."

It's happening all over.

there's something in the

Our eggs don't hatch and

"I will if you will." Laughter didn't know how to come out my mouth, but I hiccuped. Sprokly laughed.

Together we opened our doors.

"One, two ..." Sprokly started.

"Three!" I yelled and we did it. I tumbled down into the dust. It hurt my wrist and my knees got skinned but I kept the hubcap safe.

"Tarnation!" The radio roared, but the truck kept going and finally disappeared over a rise.

"He's mad," I told her

"Well who isn't?" Sprokly got up and dusted off her dress.

"Ma will be mad too," I pointed out. "It's almost dark."

"Shit!" Sprokly cussed again. "Come on then, I'll walk you back to your place. You shouldn't have to be in this mess."

"Shit!" I said.

"You're not supposed to talk like that."

"You did."

"Because I'm mad."

"Me too."

"What have you got to be mad about?" She demanded.

I held up the hubcap. The ghostly image of a horned toad stared at us. "I want my beautiful places back."

Sprokly shook her head. She dusted off her dress again. "Then I guess we best get going."

We both used our own smiles and started up the road, into the twilight. Sprokly's knee squeaked louder than ever. She winced as she walked.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Kinda," she said.

"Grampser might never make you a new one now."

"Course not." She shook her head. "He's too busy with my sister." Her hands clenched. "Guess I'll have to make my own."

"Can you?"

Sprokly just shrugged. "Look up there, Walter."

A dark straight band spread where the twilight met the ground. A lonely pair of headlights raced down it. After a moment, another pair, going the opposite way, flashed by.

"That's Highway 287." Sprokly took my hand and started walking faster. "We made it, Walter!"

"So where are the horned toads?" I asked.

"What am I?" A thin voice rasped. "Chopped fish bait?"

I almost dropped the hubcap! That's where the voice came from the metal buzzing, vibrating out the words, tingling my fingers.

Sprokly stared at the hubcap so I held it up. The horned toad was still there, shadowed in darkness, but still there.

"Look down, you dang fools," the voice in the hubcap said.

Sprokly simply squatted, clasped her hands on her knees. "So come to us. I don't want to risk stepping on you."

"That's right polite," the hubcap rasped again.

I squatted beside Sprokly, the hubcap held in front of me, and waited. The weeds rustled and finally a horned toad crawled out. It was dark, but not so dark that when it got close, I could tell it was a real one. "You're a real one," I told it.

"You're very clever," the hubcap said, the real horned toad glaring up at me, black eyes shining.

"My name is Sprokly Maezel and this is Walter Parker," Sprokly shifted until she sat cross-legged in the dirt.

"That's the one," I showed Sprokly the hubcap's image, then turned it for the horned toad to see.

"That's me, all right," the hubcap buzzed, "Folks call me Me-Maw."

"W-would you get out of my hubcap?" I asked. "Please."

"This here's the only way I can talk to you." Me-Maw puffed herself up and glared at me. "Besides, it's ours."

"No!"

"There's no need to shout," Sprokly told me. She smoothed her dress. "What do you mean your hubcap?"

"We found it first." Me-Maw cocked her knobby head at the hubcap. "We gave the hubcap its power."

"You?" I asked.

"All us horned toads," Me-Maw replied. "One thing every lizard knows: you always need an extra place to hide. Without that there's no hope. The hubcap spun off a car that was so fast and shiny we could hardly see it. Any lizard would give its tail to run that fast. Now we had a piece of its power. We started pooling our hope inside the hubcap and it changed."

Horned toads rose, swirling in spirals, spinning like tops, sailing upward into the radiance. It was the most wonderful, glorious, beautiful, fabulous thing I'd ever seen in my whole life

"I found it on my porch," I told her. "It's mine."

"You know that's a funny thing." Me-Maw cocked her head. "'Cause we hid it in a secret place in the rocks. And it moved its own self to your porch."

"Even before you had words, you had a power to you." Sprokly grinned at me. "Things with power attract each other. So you've got some right to it too."

"Charge!" A voice shouted out of the darkness.

Sprokly jumped to her feet and yelled, "Lucas, don't you dare."

Weeds and brush rippled. Sprokly bent down, cupping her hands. "Come on," she told Me-Maw, "we've got to get out of here."

The real horned toad glared back at her. Hissing noises surrounded us and there was a strange oily odor that made my nose wrinkle up and the back of my throat taste bad.

"Hurry!" Sprokly glanced at the darkness. "Lucas and his bunch can spit poison."

Finally Me-Maw crawled into Sprokly's hands.

"Come on, Walter!" Sprokly took off running. I lost her in the darkness. I didn't like this Lucas critter. I didn't like what he'd done to Me-Maw's friends. I jerked a dry stalk of wild wheat from the ground, smoothed the dusty road, and traced a few squiggles that Sprokly had once shown me. Dust devils, mouse tiny at first, then whirling up, becoming big as houses and they roared like a brimstone preacher.

"Shit!" The voice belonged to Lucas. He sounded mad, but I clutched my hubcap and started running for the highway. Shit, he wasn't the only one.

I found Sprokly when we hit the highway pavement. It felt hot beneath my shoes. The air smelled bad, full of truck exhaust, although every now and then, a breeze blew the smell away.

"Here's the boundary," Me-Maw in the hubcap said. "The Oily Ones won't come past it."

"Oily Ones?" I asked.

"She means the black horned toads." Sprokly looked down at Me-Maw, still cupped in her hands. "So what were you doing on their side of the boundary?"

"Waiting for you," Me-Maw replied.

"But how'd you know we were coming?"

"Sprokly," I said patiently, holding up the hubcap. "She's been with us all day."

"You're so bright I'll bet your Ma calls you sun." Me-Maw rasped, the hubcap buzzing. Sprokly put her hand over her mouth and giggled. I didn't get it.

We walked along the highway until Me-Maw showed us a trail that led to a little rocky mound. Sprokly set Me-Maw down on the rocks and I sat down when Sprokly did. I flipped the hubcap and Me-Maw's image was still there, sitting on the very same rock she sat on now.

"So you were waiting for us, and you want the hubcap back," Sprokly said to Me-Maw. "But what would you do with it?"

Me-Maw lifted round thorny shoulders in a shrug. "Take the rest of the horned toads into its reflection."

"Horned toads forever," I muttered. "That's all I'll ever see. Horned toads, horned toads, horned toads."

"Only when you want us," Me-Maw said. "It's a big universe; we'll find places to hide."

"But it's the same universe you're in now," Sprokly pointed out. "Why don't you just go hide in those places here?"

Me-Maw sighed and stared at the rocks.

"Un-i-verse," I said careful as I could. "Does that mean beautiful places?"

"In your case, I suppose so." Sprokly nodded.

"Un-i-verse, un-iverse, universe," I said. "It's the same universe, but it works in different ways."

"I don't get it," Sprokly said.

Ma's sigh didn't seem big enough so I used one of Pa's. I used Sprokly's own ever-so-patient voice too. "Because it's inside a hubcap."

"You really are the smart one," Me-Maw nodded at me.

Sprokly shook her head and stared at us. "That don't make sense."

"See for yourself," Me-Maw offered. "I'm in the hubcap right now. That's only my reflection sitting by you. Come on in."

"No thank you." Sprokly shook her head and her neck squeaked again.

"We're being killed off." Me-Maw turned away, staring into the darkness. "It's happening all over. It ain't just the Oily Ones, there's something in the water, or maybe the air. Our eggs don't hatch or

they break too easy." Abruptly she twisted around and blinked at me. "Walter, will you save us?"

Sprokly turned to me, her face a blur in the moonlight. She cocked her head, put her hands in her lap, and waited.

"I ... don't know." I shook my head, stared at Me-Maw in the hubcap. "For so long it's been my universe. Mine alone. I like it that way."

"But we can help you, boy." Me-Maw's voice buzzed through the hubcap. "From what I hear you're short on words. Well I know lots of words. Words even Stick Girl here doesn't know."

"Stick girl," Sprokly sputtered. "What ..."

Something came out my mouth then. It was more than a hiccup and it came out by itself. I still wasn't sure what it was.

"Stick girl," I said, and the sound came out again.

Sprokly glared at me.

"Stick Girl," Me-Maw rasped, the hubcap tickling my fingers.

Out the noise came again. Sprokly finally grinned, and then giggled. She looked at Me-Maw. "Stop calling me that, Toad Head."

It was like a hundred hiccups, only better. It made no sense but that didn't matter. The noise came out of me so hard I fell off the rock and it took a moment to get my breath back. But when I did, and climbed back onto the rock, something was different inside me. I knew what I wanted to do.

"Come in," I told Me-Maw. "All of you. Just tell me how."

"Flip it, Walter." Me-Maw narrowed her body, lifting herself off the rock. "Flip it higher than you've ever flipped it before. We'll do the rest."

I stood and held the hubcap in front of me. Me-Maw's image vanished! Instead a big full moon filled the hubcap. I flipped it then, hard as I could. End over end over endless end. Way, way up it sailed and then stopped. Moonlight glowed down on us, a full summer moon bright as day. The rocks came alive, suddenly crawling with movement. Horned toads! Had they been here all this time?

"Two hundred, five hundred, a million, billion," I whispered.

Moonlight blazed, spreading a glowing haze through the air. Horned toads rose, swirling in spirals, spinning like tops, sailing upward into the radiance. It was the most wonderful, glorious, beautiful, fabulous thing I'd ever seen in my whole life. The noise burst out of me again and again. I fell on my butt, slapping my thigh.

As the horned toads vanished into the hubcap moonlight, Sprokly jumped up, laughing, spinning, her arms stretched wide.

The last horned toad disappeared. The hubcap tumbled down and I barely managed to get up in time to catch it. Sprokly came over, brushed the dirt from my shirt and back. I didn't mind her touching me this time.

"That was a good thing you did, Walter." Sprokly folded her arms and grinned at me.

I stared at the hubcap. Stars spun in the reflection. Two hundred, five hundred, a million, billion stars and moons along with things that I hadn't learned words for yet. But no horned toads, nary a one. My hubcap was fine, doing just what it had always done, just what I wanted it to do.

"We better get back," Sprokly finally said. "It's way past dark."

"And we stole a truck," I added. "We're both in trouble."

We went back up the trail to Highway 287.

"Uh oh," Sprokly whispered and dug a wooden elbow into my ribs. A red truck, Grampser's, was parked on the roadside. Two men leaned against its fender, smoking cigarettes. Grampser of course, the other was my Pa.

Everything got quieter and quieter as we crossed the road to them, no breeze, no traffic, not even a bird call.

"Your Ma's worried sick." Grampser frowned and crushed his cigarette under his boot heel.

"You got everyone upset," Pa said, and he had the worst frown I'd seen on him since the Doctors in Dallas.

I looked at Sprokly and she looked at me, waiting. Always this waiting thing. But she wouldn't have to wait long. A voice in the hubcap rasped softly and told me what to say.

"Don't blame me," I told Pa. "It's all Stick Girl's fault!"

"You little hubcap butt!" Sprokly shouted. The noise burst out of me again and I fell on my backside right in the middle of the road. Sprokly landed beside me, holding her stomach.

"Are they laughing at us?" Grampser asked Pa.

The grin on Pa's face was glorious. "My son's never laughed a day in his life, I don't care who they're laughing at." He turned to Grampser and stuck out his hand. "Once again, sir, your granddaughter's done us a good turn." They shook hands.

"Get in the back, you two," Grampser came over and offered me his hand.

I still had trouble breathing, but I took it and he helped me up. His smile left his face then, and he stared down at Sprokly. She sat there, staring up at him, her smile gone too. They were waiting, I realized, each waiting for the other to do the right thing. Good there wasn't any traffic. These two could waste the rest of their lives waiting.

But I needed to get back to my hubcap. And hadn't we all done enough waiting today? Sometimes you got to do more to get things done. Outlined in the moonlight, all I could see were their profiles. Same long thin noses, same high foreheads, same hard chins, almost, almost like ... reflections!

I flipped the hubcap, spinning it just so. It came down and there they were just like I saw them, pretty as a picture. I leaned in toward Sprokly and showed her. "You're a hubcap. You're his hubcap."

Sprokly flinched. Her hand rose to her jaw like she was thinking hard, but her mouth stayed closed.

"What's he talking about?" Grampser asked, his hand reaching up to rub his jaw as he stared at their reflections.

I flipped the hubcap again and this time, like I wanted, Me-Maw appeared. "It didn't change," I reminded her. "Not until I did."

Grampser frowned. Sprokly shook her head. Me-Maw was right; I was the smart one. I took Grampser's hand and held it out toward Sprokly.

"M-maybe you could fix her knee," I told him.

"I might," Grampser huffed. "But I'm tired of her telling me all the things I done wrong. Maybe she could start helping out in the workshop again."

"I won't steal Life," Sprokly gazed up at him.

"Find a better way or hush up," Grampser said.

"If I do you'll use it?" Sprokly demanded. "You won't steal no more?"

Grampser slowly shook his head, hand still on his jaw. "Girl, I been looking for that grail all my life." He put on the biggest grin I'd ever seen on him.

Sprokly smiled big too, so I took her hand and placed it in Grampser's. "Maybe y'all could get up before a truck settles your hash."

Grampser hauled her up then, up into a hug. The hubcap buzzed but I didn't need it. After all, I got eyes. "Here comes that truck."

They laughed. Even Pa laughed and, hubcap buzzing, so did I. We started for the pickup and Sprokly stumbled, her knee squeaking like a rusty windmill. Grampser, wincing with each squeak, helped her climb over the tailgate.

Grampser got in the pickup. Pa jumped in and closed his door just as a big semi whooshed past. When its windy roar dwindled Grampser looked at him. "I reckon your son done me a good turn too." He held out his hand and they shook again.

"Them two are good for each other," Pa allowed.

Grampser nodded, traced something on the steering wheel. "Drive." The truck started.

"That's a hell of a trick," Pa said as we pulled away.

"I can show you how to do it," Grampser said.

"No thanks. I'll just use my key."

"Never could keep up with mine," Grampser chuckled.

Sprokly giggled and put her hand over her mouth. The noise came out of me just a bit, and I realized I could giggle too. I put my hand over my mouth like she did. We lay back, giggling, and gazed at the stars in two universes as Grampser and Pa took us home. ❧

All Beautiful Things

BY SHARON MOCK ❧ ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE LERI

The forbidden always tempts.
Do you want it because it's forbidden
or is it
forbidden
because
you want it?

Alaudrine had never seen a living human before. No creature of the conquerors' blood could enter the Court without permission; and that permission was never, ever granted. ❧ Until today. ❧ It was an occasion like nothing she had ever seen, not even her coming of age. Nobles stood three deep along the walls of the audience chamber, their finest silks, cream and yellow and rose, matching the cloud of petals on the floor. To honor the human emissary the Queen had declared a holiday, and banished the bone guards lest their provenance offend her guest. This last made Alaudrine happy—partly because they were gruesome, but more because they reminded her of her mother's absolute power over this corner of the land. ❧ The Queen and the human conversed in the conquerors' tongue, of which Alaudrine understood perhaps one word in three. So to pass the time, she amused herself by examining the man before her. He was not the parody of masculinity she had been brought up to expect. Coarse and dark, yes, skin sun-reddened, too muscular to be graceful. His clothes were mere cotton, colors harsh with chemical dyes. Stripped of his iron and his poisons and his devices, he showed his white teeth like a coward. Yet his hair was curly and dark as her own, and his eyes, not quite so blue, sparkled prettily enough when he glanced at her, which was often. Alaudrine fidgeted with more purpose, let a silk-and-crystal slipper show beneath her skirts. ❧ The Queen plucked a petal from one of the peonies that hung low over her throne and crushed it absently between her fingers. "Do you like my daughter?" she asked the emissary.

He blushed and stammered an apology. Humans blushed for many reasons, Alaudrine remembered: from embarrassment, or anger, or illness, or heat, not only sexual excitement. Her glance traveled to that place where a princess's gaze ought not go. The trousers were loose but not distorted, not distended. Apparently the coarsest of the warriors' tales—those tales a princess ought not hear—were not true either.

"Alaudrine," the Queen said.

She cast her gaze downward, and wished she could will herself to show embarrassment in her face.

"Since our guest seems to have taken a liking to you, would you show him to his chambers?"

It was a servant's job, and indeed the girl assigned to the position drew herself up in barely disguised indignation. But Alaudrine was not abashed. She made a deep curtsy to her mother, conscious of how she stood directly in front of the human as she did so. Then she took the man's warm hand, sketched a shallower yet more provocative curtsy to him, and led him out of the great hall.

She let somebody else go to him that night, however.

After supper Alaudrine sent away her handmaids and courtiers, and stood alone on her balcony to stare out over the sleeping Court. The moon was almost full, a bright smear against the dome overhead.

She had never seen the sky. When she was still an infant her mother had sealed her realm against the human invasions. At first the ensorcelled dome enclosed the entire kingdom of Vielle; then, the great city; finally, only the inner court. There the barrier had stood, impervious to the humans' devices, for well over a quarter century. Alaudrine missed the city. The buildings themselves, grown sentient from the magic-drenched soil, would sing her praises as she passed. And though they swore their allegiance to her mother the Queen, Alaudrine knew they loved her best.

She had not seen the city since her mother had abandoned it to the barbarians. Though she had tried, once, shortly after the fall. Not three steps past the barrier she had collapsed, unable to bear the city's screams, the stench of rust and blood. There the guards had found her, brought her back to her mother, and her mother had changed the ensorcellment so she could no longer pass through the dome.

"Shall I never see Vielle again?" she had cried.

"This is Vielle now," the Queen had answered, indicating with an outswept arm the whole of the inner Court. "The city is lost. It is Vielle no longer. But certainly you may go into the wasteland, if you think you are brave enough. And if you can find someone to defy my will and take you."

Alaudrine knew better than to try, even after she regained her lost courage. The Court belonged to the Queen. None would help Alaudrine; to them she was nothing more than the Queen's ornamental reflection. The Queen claimed as her own all beautiful things, even and especially her only daughter.

But she had no claim on the sky. Nor on the lost city that had once been Vielle, nor on the entire world beyond. Those treasures belonged to the human conquerors now.

And the human had blushed not for the Queen, but for her.

On the third night, Alaudrine came to the emissary herself. Her dress was woven lamb's wool, her cloak lined with rabbit pelts, her boots and gloves from the skins of newborn fawns. She knew by then he would not notice how she dressed.

"My lady," he asked her, "should you be here? Or is this another of your mother's games?"

She smiled, though his anger frightened her. "Oh, surely I should not be here. Yet I do not wish to stay away."

He breathed faster, and blushed. That could mean any number of things, she reminded herself. Yet she was certain of her interpretation. "You are so beautiful," he said, taking a step closer to her. "I shouldn't—"

But he did. He took her in his thick, warm arms and kissed her, as though she were one of the ladies-in-waiting who had shared his bed.

She stepped away. "Take me away," she said in a voice of irresistible sweetness.

"What?"

"I have never seen the world beyond this court," she lied. "Once you leave and deliver my mother's words, I will be trapped here forever. Take me with you. Let me see the world before I die."

"But the Queen—she'll never—"

"She'll let you pass, if I am with you."

He stepped toward her again. "This is folly—you don't understand—"

She did not let him touch her. If he did, he would have no reason to take her away. "Please. Let me come with you, and I will belong to you forever."

Her offer was irresistible. This much she knew for certain.

They followed the alabaster paths of the Court undisturbed. Through windows came flickers of candlelight and the sounds of pleasure, but nobody came outside at night, not anymore. With the bone guards locked away, there was nothing to hinder them, nor to remind the human of his danger. Alaudrine told herself over and over that her mother did not know, could not suspect, as though the telling might make it true.

She led the emissary away from the main gate, toward a park left to neglect where the protective dome bisected it. Nobody ventured too close to the boundary, even though the humans' toxic metals and electromagnetic fields could not penetrate the Queen's will. Alaudrine reached her hand out, felt the energy repulse her. Magic made the air oily and liquid. Past that field lay her birthright, beauty beyond her mother's reach. Past that field lay freedom.

"You should stay," the human said, the glamour slipping. "I shouldn't—your mother won't—"

"Please don't leave me here alone." She poured all her sweetness, all her longing, into her voice. Tears glittered like diamonds in the corners of her eyes. "Please," she added to be certain, "don't leave me alone without you."

He had no choice. He grabbed her arm—roughly, like a hungry man reaches for a bird—and rushed through the barrier.

There was no resistance, only a lingering sense of unease. But she was free, her mother behind her, encased in her magic prison.

She was free, she told herself, to make it true.

The warriors' gossip had not prepared Alaudrine for the carcass of Vielle. Tenements lay open to the elements, windows and doors shattered and unmended. Rubble marked where those even less lucky had stood. In some of the ruins crouched huts and rough shanties, but nothing more; this was not a place nor a time for new life. Vielle had been different once, her mother said, a forest of trees and flowers and jewels, before the humans landed on their shores. The city had learned from its invaders, the way a butterfly learns to mimic its toxic kin. It had been beautiful, her mother said, before Alaudrine was born.

Red dust drifted in the gutters. She did not recognize it until a cloud of it blew into her face, and she collapsed to her knees in pain. Rust, powdered iron, the payload of the conquerors' airships.

The emissary cursed. He gathered her up in his arms, shielded her face from the toxic air, and ran into the nearest shelter.

Who said you could enter here, human scum? the building rumbled. The man looked around for the source of the sound, as though it were a parlor trick.

"Be silent." Alaudrine's voice was hoarse, and she thought she would cough from the effort of speech. "He is with me."

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I tried to warn you—are you all right?"

It was so strange. He was an emissary—an orator—and yet in her presence he could not finish a sentence. She shook her head, let tears well up in her eyes, wrapped her arms around his chest.

And on the bare floor of that abandoned grocery she let him have

what he wanted of her. It was not the brutal undertaking she expected, though he was graceless and guileless, and the tile was hard and cold under her cloak. Yet in his eyes, not quite the color of her own, she saw a wonder and desire so complete that it was worth more than all the skill in the world. She was the Queen's daughter; of course she had been loved, worshiped, adored. But never, never like this.

By the time it was over, his expression had changed. Doubt and suspicion clouded his coarse, handsome face. "You're not a virgin," he said.

She had disappointed him. This much she knew. But she did not know his barbarian language well enough to understand why.

They traveled through the abandoned buildings to shelter her from the poisonous dust. Untended, apartments and shops grew attachments to each other, narrow service corridors and overhead walkways for inhabitants that would never come. The buildings taunted Alaudrine's lover, cursed him, challenged him. Laughter made plaster fall from cracks in the walls. Gossip traveled like ripples in a pool. They passed through a once-opulent theater and a chorus sang, *Princess, does your mother know what you have done?* The music made her blood cold, but she refused to think about it further.

In the theater they found stairs down to a subway tunnel, and at the end of the tunnel a long, frozen escalator to a grand hall. The floor was inlaid with the image of a peony. Glass mirrors in the ceiling reflected back nothing at all. The Queen's power was made manifest. The city had betrayed them.

Princess, does your mother know where you are?

Alaudrine pulled at her lover's arm but could not find the voice to warn him.

Princess, has your mother let you leave the Court?

The peony's petals closed into a knotted bud. The floor gave way beneath them, and they fell. A hillock of soil cushioned Alaudrine's landing. The city, though abandoned, remembered its fealty to the Queen. It would not let her daughter come to harm.

Princess, don't you know what you have done?

Her lover hung above her. Girders of bright metal twined around his limbs, pinning him fast. There was no blood, no mark on his ruddy flesh. His hips and legs twisted at an unnatural angle.

Alaudrine tried to reach for him and set him free, but her mother stood between them.

She knew it was an apparition; the Queen was bound to her Court. But between her daughter's blood and the building's fealty, there was more than enough power to manifest.

"Oh, daughter," the vision said. "Did you think you could leave me?"

Alaudrine hung her head in shame and despair.

"Did you think this cur could set you free? In his world you would be as any other prisoner. He would tire of you, dispose of you, and you would die."

"No," she whispered, though she knew her mother spoke the truth. She was, after all, the Queen.

"And you," the Queen said to the emissary. "I offered you hospitality, and you answered me with the treachery and avarice of your kind. What shall I grant you in return?"

"Leave him alone!" Alaudrine cried.

The emissary writhed at the sound of her voice, blank blue eyes no longer so very much like her own at all, and she screamed in horror.

She did not realize, at first, the nature of her mother's curse. The more she screamed, the more he writhed; the more he writhed, the louder she screamed. By the time she understood how her anguish cut into her lover's flesh, it was too late. Horror filled her, spilled out of her, no matter how she tried to contain it. She knew that silence would spare him, but silence was beyond her.

He died of pain long before the warriors arrived. The Queen's apparition had faded away hours ago.

They bore Alaudrine away in a covered litter, plucked the corpse off the girders and dumped it in an open cart. They took her not to her chambers, nor even to the prison, but to the Queen's workshop, and there her mother waited.

"You do not have to help me, daughter," she said. "But by all the stars in the sky, you will stay here to see what you have done."

Alaudrine tried to tell her mother to stop, to spare her lover, let him remain dead, unaltered and unmolested. But the Queen's cold disappointment drove all defiance from her heart, and her throat was torn too raw to make a sound. She could do nothing more than watch like an obedient daughter as her mother set to work.

The Queen hung the emissary's corpse by his heels and caught his blood in a silvered basin, which she set aside to catch the feeble moonlight. She harvested the bones from his flesh, washed them in milk and snowmelt. The long, thick bones of his arms and legs she joined to make two curving beams. His collarbone formed the head of the frame, his pelvis the base. Where joints met, bone peonies bloomed to fuse an unbreakable structure.

His hair became jet to inlay into the bone. His eyes were sapphires mounted on the frame's crest. His teeth the Queen used as ivory, more or less as they were. His flesh she set aside for her own devices, and Alaudrine never saw it again.

On the acme of the full moon the Queen harvested the crust from the silvered basin with a silver knife, carried it to the frame with silver tongs, and mounted it with nails carved from fingerbones. Alaudrine ran to the basin, but her lover's blood was gone. All she saw was her own face reflected back at her, her eyes mad with grief, red-rimmed and unrecognizable.

The Queen took her daughter by the shoulders and led her to see what her lover had become. A mirror of bone and jet and ivory and jewels, its glass dark, reflecting nothing.

"Harlot!" the mirror shouted. "You lied to me, seduced me, led me to die!"

He was right. She'd known what her mother would do—known, and refused to accept it. She'd sacrificed him for the chance to be free, to be Queen of her own realm, however small. She deserved every punishing word.

"You knew what you asked of me! You betrayed me!"

Yet even as he berated her, an image took form in the smoky glass.

"Look what you've done!"

In the mirror she looked more beautiful than she had when she'd first seen him. Her gown was finest silk, her hair freshly combed, her sapphire eyes sparkling and clear. The reflection smiled back at her with cool and pitiless grace.

Behind her image, her mother would not take shape. She was a thing of shadows, twisted broken jaws and grinning tumors emerging and disappearing into mist. But Alaudrine's image stayed the same, no matter how hard she stared at it.

In the mirror of his blood, she saw his vision of her, and she was the most beautiful creature she'd ever seen.

After a fortnight the Queen tried to have the mirror destroyed, but Alaudrine would not allow it. She flung her arms around her lover's remains, cheek pressed against the glass. It was the first time she had stopped looking at her reflection since its creation.

It took two strong warriors to bring the mirror to the Princess's room. They walked slowly, ears stuffed with wax, and they carried it backward, so that she would never have to look away.

Since that day she has not slept, nor eaten, nor left the mirror's gaze. She grows thin and pale, but she does not die; she cannot, for she is the Queen's daughter. The hall in which her chambers lie has been abandoned. Music now fills the inner Court at all hours, lest the mirror's voice carry and reach the ears of the Queen. But Alaudrine does not care. She is used to being despised. It is the image that she craves, the image forever embedded in her lover's blood and bone, that moment when she was so briefly and so perfectly adored. ❧

THE Claw Unseen

"If a man commits murder, is it justice to arrest the knife?" Perhaps ...

"No. It's blood. Look." Baqir touched the tips of his fingers in the sticky pool of liquid, and showed them to Jawalhir. ❧ "See?" he asked. "Now do you believe me?" ❧ Jawalhir looked from Baqir's bloody fingers to the gloom of Ibrahim's Ladder above, to where the notch climbed up through the belly of the cliff. She wrapped her arms around herself; misgiving showed on her face, but she said nothing. ❧ Baqir turned back to the steps. Ibrahim's Ladder ascended into shadows above him, the rock-cut basalt steps becoming less and less distinct the farther they climbed. He could see no bodies, and he wondered how much blood there'd have to be for it to flow this far. ❧ 'We should leave," Jawalhir said from behind him. "I don't like this." ❧ Baqir sighed and turned back to face her. "I thought we'd decided this? One trip, that's all we need." ❧ Jawalhir looked away. "We should go back," she repeated. ❧ "And then what?" Baqir waved a hand at the slope behind Jawalhir, where bare rock and scree ran down steeply to a ridge of basalt, jutting from the rock like the spine of a great beast entombed in stone. Beyond, and far, far below, lay the forest they'd climbed through two days previous, blued by distance and haze. ❧ "You want to go back?" Baqir asked. "It's eight days back to Quysayrah. Eight days! We've not even climbed the Ladder, and you want to go back?" ❧ "That's blood, Baqir! Blood!" Jawalhir jabbed a finger at the liquid, which looked black against the basalt steps. ❧ "And?" Baqir spread his hands wide. "This isn't the first time you've seen blood. What about that job on the Street of Divine Harmony? You weren't frightened of blood then, as I remember." ❧ "I stuck him in the leg, as you well know." Jawalhir pointed to the blood again. "Look at it, Baqir! It's not even dry. There're dead men up there—a lot of them, and you know it as well as I." ❧ Baqir grinned. "Jawalhir, my sweet." He took her hands. "My doe-eyed beauty, jewel of Quysayrah. Th'art fairer than snow, sweeter than honey." ❧ Jawalhir looked away, but a smile played at the corners of her mouth. ❧ "Not for all the houris in Tukecht's Paradise would I forsake you, O clear spring of loveliness." Baqir paused, and looked thoughtful. "Although, Suf Abd'al Tukecht does say that the number of houris in Tukecht's paradise exceeds even the number of stars in the sky and the grains of sand in the Lands of the Dead, which means an extremely large number of radiantly beautiful, supple, and most importantly willing virgins." Baqir hummed, then struck a pose. "Not for ten houris, well, perhaps, five, or two—" ❧ Jawalhir punched him hard on the arm. ❧ "Th'art wild as the she-panther," Baqir said, rubbing his arm and smiling. "Come here that I may tame you with sweet caresses, O exquisite daughter of Basu."

BY EUAN HARVEY ILLUSTRATION BY ROB JOHNSON

Jawalhir laughed aloud, throwing back her head. Her teeth were impossibly white against her dark skin, and in the hollow of her throat, Baqir saw a fluttering pulse. His smile broadened, becoming foolish, but he was so filled up with love he would not have cared if the whole of Quysayrah had been laughing at him.

When Jawalhir finished laughing, Baqir bowed extravagantly. "Shall we ascend, O dove of the morning?"

"You win," Jawalhir said. She looked up at the darkness of Ibrahim's Ladder, and stopped smiling. When she looked back at Baqir, her face was serious. "But I want you to promise me that you'll be careful, Baqir. I mean it."

A flippant reply sprang to Baqir's lips, but as he looked at Jawalhir, he saw the depth of her concern. He swallowed, then nodded. "I will," he said.

They found the first of the bodies halfway up the Ladder.

A young man, he lay on his back, his head pointing down the steps of the Ladder, his feet pointing up. His eyes were open and glassy, his hair clotted with blood. A ragged wound gaped in his throat and blood glistened black on the steps below him.

Baqir paused on the step below the corpse and stared at it. He'd known there was death here—where else could the blood come from? But knowing was not seeing, and now he wondered if he had done the right thing.

Looking beyond the man, he saw other corpses farther up the stairs, dark and dim-edged shapes in the gloom. They lay scattered in awkward poses, like dolls thrown from the hand of an angry child. Not one of them moved. Baqir listened hard, but the only sounds that came to his ears were his breathing and the thumpthump of his heart.

"Baqir?" Jawalhir said from behind him.

"They're here," Baqir called over his shoulder. He lifted his torch higher, and flickering yellow light washed a little farther up the Ladder. He heard Jawalhir's hiss of indrawn breath as she saw the bodies.

"Are they all dead?" she asked after a moment.

"Either that, or they're really deeply asleep." Baqir stepped forward, picking his way up the steps and past the corpse of the young man. As he did, he looked at the terrible wound in the corpse's throat. Something about it made him stop. He leaned close and peered at it.

"What is it?" Jawalhir said.

"I don't know." Baqir probed the wound with a cautious finger, then he realized. He breathed a quick prayer to Eksh as Trickster—Baqir's patron.

"What?" Jawalhir asked again.

"It's not cut," Baqir said, not taking his eyes from the wound.

"What do you mean?"

"The wound." Baqir straightened up. "His throat wasn't cut. Something ripped it out. Look at the edges, the flesh is torn, not sliced or cut." He drew his knife, the long-bladed Pelishti knife his father had left him, and turned to face the darkness of the Ladder. He gripped the handle of the knife so tight the wires that bound the hilt bit into his flesh. Behind him, he heard the shhhing of oiled metal as Jawalhir drew her knife.

"We should leave," Jawalhir said. "Go back to the mules and get back to Quysayrah. There're plenty more merchants in the Upper City."

For a moment, Baqir was tempted, but then he thought of the money he'd lost. Fat Ma'mun was not a forgiving man, and if Baqir couldn't pay what he owed, then Fat Ma'mun would take it in flesh. Ten dirhams would buy him Baqir's eyes, at least—or maybe he'd want something fleshier. Baqir's hand groped unconsciously for his groin. He could get ten dirhams in stolen goods—if he had six months. But he didn't have six months, or even six weeks; the money was due by the new moon of Ku'pechti, three weeks from now.

His only chance of getting the money was the World Above. Just one artifact from frozen and dead Sumiri would more than pay off Fat Ma'mun, and leave enough over so he'd be able to really look after Jawalhir. And with the Black Highway sewn up tighter than a Pelishti money-lender's backside, Ibrahim's Ladder was the only way up to Sumiri.

But the Ladder was choked with dead men, men that something had broken and ripped and tossed aside.

"Baqir?" Jawalhir said from behind him.

"Shh!" Baqir said. He cocked an ear toward the stairs of the Ladder, although in truth, he'd already decided what he was going to do. "Can you hear anything?"

After a moment, Jawalhir reluctantly said, "Nothing."

"That's because whatever did this has gone," Baqir said. And just what had it been? he wondered.

"Gone?" Jawalhir said. "The blood's not dry, Baqir. How far could it get? And what could do this?"

"Ice-worms? Dire-wolf?" Baqir shrugged. "Cave bear? I don't know. Doesn't matter either—it's gone, whatever it was."

And whatever it was, he added silently to himself, Eksh knows it wasn't ice-worms, a wolf, or a bear. No marks of claws in the flesh, just torn edges.

"Please," Jawalhir said.

Baqir heard the pleading in her voice. He turned to face her, and felt a rush of love as he saw the worry in her face, but he knew Fat Ma'mun would still be waiting for him when Baqir got back from Ibrahim's Ladder. He had to get something to pay that pig-eyed bastard off.

"Look," Baqir said, hating himself even as he saw the fear on Jawalhir's face. "We'll just go and have a look. Whatever did this, it's gone. Can you hear it? No. So it's gone. Trust me." He grinned. "Don't you trust me?"

Something in Jawalhir's face folded in on itself. "Go on then," she said.

Baqir felt a sudden urge to tell her about Fat Ma'mun, to explain and justify himself, but he knew that if Jawalhir found out he'd been gambling again, after what he'd promised her, then what Fat Ma'mun would do to him would look like mild discomfort by comparison.

So he said nothing, just turned and picked his way up the stairs of the Ladder, around the sprawled bodies, his feet sticky in the blood that coated the stone.

Twenty steps farther up, he reached a clot of bodies that blocked the stairs in front of him. At least six men lay in a tangle of arms and legs. Glassy eyes stared, the light from the torches flickering in them. Mouths gaped wide, as did the wounds in their bodies, bloodless now, the exposed flesh pale, drained of the blood that had run down the stairs.

Something about the man in the center drew Baqir's eye. He peered closer. This man was huge; he must have stood a good seven feet high in life. He wore loose, calf-length trousers. His feet were bare, and instead of the thick furs and robes of the other corpses, he wore nothing on his torso but a thin shirt open at the front. The sleeves had been ripped off, leaving ragged edges that were tight around his hugely muscled arms. Blood was caked thickly under his fingernails; it coated the man's arms up to his elbows, as if he was wearing brown gloves.

Baqir stared a moment more, wondering what it was about this

It glinted gold in the torch light, a statue of a many-armed figure with a thin gold chain attached to it. Rubies gleamed deep red in the torch light, like drops of blood.

man that was different from the others. A moment later, he realized: this man's wounds were sharp-edged, and they covered his whole body. Gashes from blades, nicks, slices and cuts covered his torso and arms. Some shallow, others deep, cutting down deep into flesh. In some, pallid bone gleamed in the torch light.

The man's face and neck were hidden, concealed under the body of another dead man, who lay across the stairs. Baqir felt a sudden urge to see the man's face, and he reached forward to drag the other corpse away. But no sooner had he grabbed a leg and lifted it, than something metallic fell to the stone step, dislodged by Baqir's movement. It glinted gold in the torch light, a statue of a many-armed figure with a thin gold chain attached to it. Rubies gleamed deep red in the torch light, like drops of blood.

Baqir reached down and picked it up. The statue had sharp edges, and one of them pricked him. He hissed in pain, dropped the object and sucked his injured finger.

"What is it?" Jawalhir said from behind. "What have you found?"

"I think I know who killed all these men," Baqir said. "And it wasn't a cave-bear. Come and look." He bent over and picked up the statue again, being careful to avoid any spikes or sharp edges, then dropped it into a fold in his robe.

Steps sounded from behind, then Jawalhir said, "So? What killed them?"

"Him," Baqir said, nodding at the giant in the center of the tangle of men. "He's the only one with wounds that've been cut, and he's got blood all over his arms."

"You mean he ripped out the throats of the others?" Jawalhir said. "You can't mean that."

"I can, and I do."

"But that's ... No man could do that."

"You remember Hifaz i Faruk, don't you?" Baqir asked. "You remember what happened when his wife left him? Smoked hafeez for a week without sleep, then picked up a sword and started hacking. Killed ten men before they put him down, and even then he was crawling on his belly and trying to bite. This is the same."

"Hifaz i Faruk didn't rip out people's throats," Jawalhir said.

"True, but Hifaz i Faruk had the body of an underfed chicken," Baqir said. He jerked a thumb at the huge man's corpse. "Look at the size of this one. He's got arms thicker than my legs."

"I don't know," Jawalhir said. "I don't like this at all. Let's go, please."

Baqir felt the agreeable weight of the gold statue in his robe. He grinned. "Your desires are the stars by which I steer the course of my life, O sultry-eyed mistress of my heart." He bowed elaborately. "Th'art always my Queen, the absolute ruler of my soul."

Jawalhir looked suspicious, but turned and started down the stairs again. Baqir smiled, quickly slipped the gold statue into a pouch, then followed her.

It took them two days to make their way down the slope to the tree-lined. In the morning of the third day, they saw the asshuri and the priest.

Jawalhir tugged at Baqir's jacket. "Get down," she hissed. "They'll see you!"

"They won't see me," Baqir said. "Stop pulling at me!" He brushed her hand from his jacket, then turned back to the group of men winding their way up the slope not three hundred feet from him. He raised his head a little more until he could see them clearly.

He lay full-length on top of a rocky bluff that jutted from the slope like the stump of a tooth. The top was flat, the sides steep. At the southern end, the bluff dropped a good hundred feet or so to the slope below. At the northern, the flat surface of the bluff merged with the slope—hidden in the firs that covered this upper part of the slope. A dusting of snow lay on the gray rock of the bluff, and Baqir's breath plumed out, but he didn't feel the cold; it was nowhere near as biting as it had been at the Ladder.

The men he was looking at were moving quickly up the slope. Scale armor gleamed in the sunlight, as did their helmets and the leaf-shaped blades at the tips of their spears. A string of pack beasts followed the men, mules burdened with heavy packs. Baqir counted thirty asshuri, and one priest at the head of the column. The priest was a thick-shouldered man, with large hands and a chunky face. He was bald, shaved so that his scalp shone. He wore the red of Afaz, and Baqir was sure the man was a Hand. It was there in the way the priest moved—a rolling, muscular gait like that of a bear.

"Down!" Jawalhir whispered at him. "They'll see you!" She tugged again at his jacket. This time, Baqir let her pull him back, although irritation flared in him. She was always holding him back. He knew she only did it because she was worried, but did she have to fuss so?

They scrambled backward to the northern edge of the bluff, then crept into the trees and started working their way down on the far side of the rocky outcrop to the asshuri.

"Well?" Jawalhir asked, when they reached their mules.

"If you wanted to know, then why didn't you look?" Baqir snapped.

"They would've seen you if you'd stayed there," Jawalhir said. "You know that."

"They wouldn't have seen me," Baqir said. "They weren't even looking around. You need to stop nagging."

"How many of them were there?" Jawalhir asked.

"Thirty. And a Hand of Afaz," Baqir said. "Come on, let's go." He took the reins of one of the mules, leaving the other for Jawalhir.

"A Hand of Afaz? And thirty asshuri?" Jawalhir said. "What were they doing?"

Baqir pressed his lips together in irritation, then replied. "Next time I see them, I'll be sure to ask."

"Don't be like that," Jawalhir said. "Thirty men is a big patrol, and why would a Hand of Afaz be with them?"

Baqir frowned. Jawalhir had a point there, he had to admit. The city mounted regular patrols along the upper slope. If unchecked, Pelishti slavers would creep in along these upper reaches, raiding and kidnapping from the villages closer to Quysayrah. Baqir and Jawalhir had seen patrols on their way up the Ibrahim's Ladder, seen them and avoided them. But those patrols had been four or five men, not thirty heavy asshuri.

And then there was the Hand. Just what would a Hand of Afaz be doing out here?

"I don't know," he said aloud. "Maybe they've heard of a slave raid."

There was silence for a moment from Jawalhir, then she said, "Have you ever heard of a Hand of Afaz hunting slavers?"

Baqir said nothing.

"You think it's ..." Jawalhir cleared her throat. "You think it's to do with what we found on the Ladder?"

"I don't know, and I don't much care," Baqir said. "What I do know is that they didn't see us, and that's just gold with me. Come on, let's get moving."

Jawalhir lapsed into silence. As they picked their way through the trees, heading down to the city road far below, Baqir's hand drifted over the pouch at his belt, the pouch that hung heavy, warped by the weight of the object inside it.

Six days after that—when they reached the city road around a mile before the fort of the Shah's Finger—Baqir looked back and saw the asshuri were following them.

Thin clouds flamed pink and orange to the east as light washed over the slope. The air still held the chill of night and there was no haze yet. Baqir stretched, working the cricks out of his back—he hated sleeping rough, and Jawalhir had snored and grunted all night, like some kind of wild hog.

Looking downslope from the rocky outcrop where they'd slept, he saw Heshem's Midden far below, mist drifting over its surface. And beyond the Midden, there was the faintest line of yellow—the beginnings of the desert and the lands of the dead.

Something tickled his mind as he looked out, and his hand strayed to the pouch at his belt. He touched the statue, then he suddenly felt eyes on him from behind.

He whirled round, and upslope, perhaps three miles away, a figure moved and light flashed from metal, a blinding glint in the dawn

light. Baqir watched; there was another glint, and then no more.

The asshuri, Baqir thought. They were after him. He couldn't say how he knew, but he was sure of it. He gripped the pouch tightly. He couldn't let them have the statue; if he didn't have it when he got back to Quysayrah, then Fat Ma'mun would take his payment from Baqir's flesh. That statue was Baqir's future! It was his life!

He stalked over to the campsite. Jawalhir still slept, her mouth slightly open. Baqir had to fight an urge to simply kick her awake. Instead, he leaned down and shook her roughly.

"Get up!" he said. "We need to get moving!"

"Wha—" Jawalhir mumbled.

"Up!" Baqir rammed his blanket and pot into his pack.

Jawalhir sat up, her hair tousled. She yawned. "What's happening?"

"I'm leaving, that's what's happening," Baqir said. "If you're coming with me, then start moving." He stood, strode over to the mules, and unhobbled them. Without waiting for Jawalhir, he took the halter and started off for Quysayrah.

Jawalhir caught up with him a few moments later. She set her pack on one of the mules, then glared at Baqir as she strode next to him.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped.

"The asshuri are following us," Baqir said.

"And how do you know that?"

Baqir clenched his fists. He did not look at Jawalhir; the sound of her voice enraged him—if he saw her face, he'd snap. "I saw them," he said, biting off each word.

"Where?"

"Up slope. Five miles."

"How do you know it was them? And even if it is them, why do you think they'd be after us?"

Baqir said nothing. The thought of explaining things to Jawalhir just made his belly feel sour and curdled with anger. He looked at the road ahead. Two days to Quysayrah. Two more days and then he could—

Jawalhir's voice interrupted his thoughts. "You found something, didn't you?"

Baqir hunched his shoulders. His free hand grasped the pouch at his waist.

"You did, didn't you?" Jawalhir said, conviction turning to anger in her voice.

He said nothing, just glared at the road.

"What was it?" Jawalhir demanded. "Well? What did you find?"

"Nothing," Baqir snapped. "I didn't find anything. Hear me? Nothing!"

"So what's in that pouch you're holding?"

"Nothing."

Jawalhir grabbed for the pouch. Baqir turned from her, but she followed and tried to snatch the pouch from him.

"Leave me, woman!" Baqir snarled.

"Give it to me! Give it to me now!" Jawalhir dove for the pouch again.

She would not leave him alone! Always, she was nagging at him, driving him down and treading on him. The statue was his! He needed it, and it was nothing to do with her!

Baqir backhanded her across the mouth, hard. The slap sounded very loud. Jawalhir's face showed shock, then paled with anger—save for the livid red marks left by his hand. She glared at him, and blood ran from the corner of her mouth where his blow had split her lip.

"Keep it then!" she said icily. "I'm done with you, molester of dogs. Touch me again, and I'll gut you." Her knife had appeared in her hand as if by magic. The tip of the blade pointed at Baqir's belly.

"She-dog." Baqir spat on the ground in front of Jawalhir. "The only thing worse than your stench is your whining. I am well rid of you." He walked backward, leading his mule with him, until he was well out of the reach of her knife, then he turned and walked on.

He did not look back, but his hand clutched the pouch at his waist very tightly, as if seeking reassurance.

When he reached the gate, Fat Ma'mun was waiting for him.

The money-lender was a huge man, corpulent to the point of being grotesque. Tiny eyes peered through slits of flesh; his face was jowly and swollen. Gold rings gleamed on pudgy hands. He had thick arms, and even thicker legs. Rolls of fat pushed out his loose white robes.

As soon as he saw Baqir walk through the Beggar's Gate onto the Street of Roses, Fat Ma'mun pushed himself upright from his folding wooden chair and rolled toward him.

Baqir stopped where he was. As he waited for Fat Ma'mun, Baqir rolled his shoulders under his shirt. It felt tight, as did the waistband of his trousers, and his boots pinched too. The discomfort irritated him, as did watching that bloated whoreson waddle his way across the street.

Fat Ma'mun stopped in front of Baqir. He cocked his gross head to one side and looked Baqir up and down. "You look well, Baqir i Danaf. You look ... prosperous."

Baqir watched as a droplet of sweat rolled down the side of Fat Ma'mun's face, only to disappear in the rolls of fat at the man's neck. The sight sickened him. Never before had he seen such a disgusting creature.

"Well, Baqir?" Fat Ma'mun asked. "Are you prosperous?" His chins wobbled when he spoke.

How could he give the statue to such a revolting creature? Baqir asked himself. Fat Ma'mun would just melt it down, and the statue was a delicate thing. A work of art.

Fat Ma'mun drew breath to speak, but Baqir cut him off. "I thought I had till the new moon of Ku'pechti. Was I wrong?"

"You're back from the World Above," Fat Ma'mun said, then laughed, his jowls wobbling. "Ah! You are surprised! But why?" He chuckled. "You have no secrets from me, aBaq," he said, using the diminutive form of Baqir's name.

Baqir thought of the statue and said nothing.

"I thought: perhaps Baqir, he will settle his debt early?" Fat Ma'mun spread his hands wide. "He comes back from the World Above, perhaps he has a trinket for Ma'mun? A little something from old Sumiri? No?"

All Baqir could think about was how much Ma'mun disgusted him. He wondered what kind of sound the fat man would make if Baqir cut off his fingers and nose.

"I see not." The good humor dropped off Ma'mun's face, discarded like the mask it was. "So then. That is the way it shall be. Your debt is due the new moon of Ku'pechti. Fifteen dirhams, Baqir, and not a dinar less."

"Fifteen?" Baqir snapped. "We agreed on ten!"

"Did we?" Fat Ma'mun's piggy eyes glittered. "Perhaps you have this written down somewhere? No? Ah. Then perhaps it is your memory that is failing you?"

Rage swelled up inside Baqir. Who did this gutter-born dog think he was? Bloated, stinking fatherless pig!

"You'll get ten," he grated, glaring at Ma'mun.

Saying nothing, Fat Ma'mun motioned to one of the men behind him with a flick of his fingers. The man stepped forward, cracking his knuckles. Baqir recognized him immediately: Yusuf, one of Fat Ma'mun's enforcers, the one they called "Fingers" from his habit of snapping other peoples'.

"Yusuf, teach aBaq here about the proper respect shown to people of importance," Ma'mun said, not taking his eyes off Baqir.

Yusuf grunted and strode forward.

Baqir glanced left and right, but the guards had vanished. Paid off by Ma'mun, he thought. And if not bribed, then too scared of the moneylender to intervene. But who cared for them anyway? He did not need the help of those whining wretches that held the gate! Anger filled him; he felt stuffed with it, heavy, as if blood suffused his whole body.

There was a soft ripping sound, but Baqir paid it no attention. Yusuf stepped forward, his face impassive, then powered a heavy blow toward Baqir's face.

Had it landed, it would have stretched Baqir on the stone of the street. But it didn't. For all his size, Yusuf was slow and clumsy. Baqir grabbed the man's fist and squeezed. Yusuf's eyes opened

The whitewash was flaked, and in places the plaster had peeled clean away from the walls like diseased skin, exposing the brick bones of the building underneath.

wide. He gasped.

Baqir snarled at him and squeezed harder. Bones snapped with brittle cracks, and Yusuf shouted in pain. Baqir squeezed yet harder, crushing Yusuf's hand utterly.

When he let go, Yusuf gasped, then fell to his knees, holding up his arm in front of him. His hand was an unrecognizable pulp of bloodied flesh, purple and red, gleaming bones poking from it.

Fat Ma'mun—motionless the whole time—took two steps backward. The Street of Roses was very quiet. No one spoke.

Another slow, drawn-out ripping sound came from Baqir's shoulders. He looked down in disgust. The seams around his shoulders had given way. He tore the sleeves off and threw them away, then turned and glared at Fat Ma'mun.

"Fifteen dirhams? Watch, you stinking leper, and see what coin I'll pay you in," Baqir said, then drew his long-bladed Pelishti knife with a shhhhck of oiled metal. Fat Ma'mun took another step back. Sweat rolled down his face. Yusuf moaned and rocked back and forth, holding his crushed hand up in front of him like a totem.

"No," Yusuf said when he saw the knife. His voice was surprisingly soft.

Baqir snarled, then leaned down and with a single quick movement cut Yusuf's throat. He stepped back and watched as the blood gushed out, splashing onto the stone of the Street of Roses. No one moved, and in moments, it was all over, and Yusuf lay unmoving in the center of a dark pool of blood.

"You are unwise," Ma'mun said, though he made no move toward Baqir.

Baqir took a step forward. The moneylender disgusted him. Sweat gleamed on the fat man's skin and rolled down his face in large droplets. Baqir could smell the stench coming off Fat Ma'mun, a revolting mix of old sweat and greed. Baqir would be doing the city a favor if he excised this cancer from its belly. He raised the knife.

Fat Ma'mun took another step backward. "Stop him," he said over his shoulder. The two of his men farthest from Baqir looked at each other, then turned on their heels and fled. The remaining man shuffled toward Baqir, his knife trembling in front of him, but when Fat Ma'mun also turned and ran—his fat wobbling and jiggling—he too broke and ran.

Baqir watched them run. He sneered. To think that he'd been afraid of Fat Ma'mun for so long! The moneylender was nothing but a street dog. He'd growl at those he thought weaker, but when someone stood up to him, he turned and ran.

But seeing Fat Ma'mun run didn't diminish the anger swelling inside Baqir. On the contrary, Ma'mun's cowardice only infuriated Baqir further. The moneylender was a stain, a tumor. The thought of Ma'mun's oily, fat-swaddled face enraged Baqir. He felt blood rushing to his face and there was a roaring in his ears.

Fat Ma'mun would die, Baqir decided. And soon. But first he was hungry. His belly growled and rumbled, as if he hadn't eaten for days. He knew what he wanted, too—meat, and lots of it. He looked down at the corpse in the street, then shook his head. He wasn't that hungry. Not yet. He flicked the blood from his knife, sheathed it, then walked down the Street of Roses, heading toward the Shaykhun district and the Suk of Strangers.

Ma'mun's assassins came at sunset.

When Jawalhir walked through the Gate of Beggars, a mass of people blocked the Street of Roses ahead of her. They stood with their backs to her, heads craning for a better view of something beyond that she couldn't see. Excited whispers came from the crowd; the atmosphere was that of a public execution, or a fight.

A guard leaned against one side of the massive stone archway of the gate. He looked bored and was trimming his nails with a small knife.

"What's going on?" Jawalhir asked him, nodding toward the crowd.

"There's been a killing," the guard said. He looked at the crowd, then spat in the dust beside him. "Look at them," he said scornfully. "You'd think they'd never seen a dead man before!"

"Who got killed?" Jawalhir asked as casually as she could.

"Some shylock from the Lower City brought his men up here. It's one of them who got killed." The guard made a slicing motion over his throat. "From here to here, neat as you like."

Jawalhir nodded to the guard, then walked through the gate and into the city. She worked her way round the edges of the crowd, pulling her mule after her. People looked round angrily at her, and she drew her fair share of curses and insults as she pushed her way through the closely packed people. After a few minutes, she could see an open area to her right, where men in scale armor and gleaming helmets kept the crowd back. Peering over people's shoulders, she could just see a corpse sprawled on the paving stones. Blood formed a dark pool round the body. Something about the glimpses of the body she saw seemed familiar, so she pushed her way forward, braving the gauntlet of curses and angry looks.

She was halted by the press of people just before the open space, but by craning her neck, she could just see over the shoulder of the man in front of her.

The dead man lay on his back staring upward with glazed eyes. She recognized the man's face immediately: Fingers Yusuf—one of Fat Ma'mun's men, and the one sent on the worst of the dirty jobs. The wound under his throat was just like the guard had said: from ear to ear and neat as a butcher's stroke. As well as the throat, something had crushed Yusuf's hand, squashed it to a broken pulp. Sharp ends of snapped bones protruded from the mass of purple and red flesh.

And then she saw the sleeves on the stone next to the corpse. Even though the fabric had soaked up the blood from the dead Yusuf, changing its color from blue to purple, still she recognized it. They were the sleeves from Baqir's shirt, ripped down the seam and discarded in the street.

Jawalhir looked at the sleeves, and then at Yusuf's hand. She thought of the dead man on Ibrahim's Ladder—the half-naked giant, the man who had torn the other men's throats out with his bare hands.

How strong would you have to be to rip out a man's throat? she wondered. More or less than you'd need to crush a man's hand into pulp?

She knew why the asshuri were following them now. And she also knew why they had a Hand of Afaz with them. What seemed excessive for a slave raid now looked like a reasonable level of force.

Baqir had lied. He'd found something on the Ladder.

Or something had found him.

Baqir stood at the edge of the roof garden and rested his hands on the wall. Below him, Quysayrah tumbled downslope in a maze of white-washed walls and enclosed roof gardens. Half a mile below, at the very edge of the Lower City, ran the city wall, its ramparts rising far above the nearest of the houses, but still well below Baqir. Beyond the walls, the fields ran down to Ishmael's Rib, and then dropped off out of sight. Far below, Baqir could see the green of Heshem's Midden, but mist and haze obscured any detail.

Anger swelled in him as he looked down at the roofs of the Lower City. Why did he have to live here, down at the bottom of the city? The people here sickened him. They crawled over each other, crowded in close like maggots in rotting meat. What did it matter if any of them died? Would anyone notice, or even care if they did?

He turned to look above him. Leaning back against the low retaining wall, he could see the city climbing upslope above him. Walls shining white in the sun rose up and up to the high gray parapet of the Lower City Wall. Beyond that, the roofs of the Middle City, then the massive pink granite Pillar of Heaven, with the Upper Cities—priestly Keshet and mercantile Lakaf—flowing around it. Atop the Pillar of Heaven, the Shah's palace sparkled as the bronze and gold on top of the outer walls caught the sun.

Baqir's fists clenched tightly. Pain flared in his palms and he felt blood welling out from between his fingers, but the knowledge that his fingernails were cutting into his palms just stoked his rage. The Middle and Upper Cities were no better than the Lower. The differences that the Middle and Upper City dwellers were so proud of, they were no more than the difference between the maggot and the blowfly.

How could he have been so blind all his life? He had lived in this city for years, but only now did he understand its true nature. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children, all crammed together until the very air grew thick with their stench. All of them screwing and drinking and eating and pissing ...

A trickle of blood oozed out of Baqir's nose. It ran round the corner of his mouth and down to his chin.

They would have to die. All of them. They nauseated him: their whining, stinking, and shitting. He'd have no peace until they were dead.

A board creaked in his room.

Baqir smiled. His teeth were bloody. He touched the statue where it rested against the skin of his chest. He waited.

Two thick-set men stepped out onto the small roof garden. Both held long knives. The blades gleamed in the bloody light of sunset.

"Ma'mun sends his regards," one of them said.

Baqir said nothing. Rage and joy swelled in him, pressing outward at his skin. He felt full, congested with wrath and the exaltation that came from knowing he was going to kill these two men. His hands twitched.

The men glanced at each other uneasily, then spread out to either side. The tips of their knives danced complex little patterns in the air. They drew closer.

"You should be running," Baqir said.

The man who had spoken looked disconcerted for a moment, then recovered his poise. He sneered. "Is that so? Well, time to die, dog-fucker." He lunged, the point of his knife driving for Baqir's belly.

Baqir struck. His hand snapped out then closed around the assassin's wrist, stopping his lunge dead. The man strained, grunting with effort, but he could not move the knife an inch farther toward Baqir.

"Stick him, you fool!" the assassin shouted to the other man. Footsteps scuffed behind Baqir. Quick as thought, he yanked hard, whipping the assassin forward and round, as he spun in place. The bones in the man's arm snapped with loud cracks, but the man's shout of pain cut off with a cough as the second man's knife impaled him in the chest.

The second assassin's eyes went wide as he realized what he'd done. Baqir tossed the dying man aside contemptuously and reached forward. The second man had time to take two steps backward before Baqir grabbed him by shoulder and groin. Lifting the man up as if he weighed no more than a sack of oats, Baqir strode to the edge of the roof garden, then threw the man off. The assassin pinwheeled through the air. His head struck the corner of the roof garden wall below with a loud crack that left a smear of red on the whitewash. When he fell to the Steps, he lay still and unmoving.

Baqir spat after the assassin, turned, stomped on the other man's corpse—ribs cracked and splintered—then stalked into his room and down the stairs. The other patrons of the Pelishti's Head had locked themselves in their rooms, and the restaurant on the ground floor was empty. Split wine, uneaten food, and scattered cushions told of the speed with which the patrons had scuttled for safety.

None of them had warned him. None of them had tried to stop the assassins—and yet all would have known what they were, and what they wanted. Baqir's rage was so thick he thought his veins must burst from it. They could cower in their rooms, but it wouldn't help them.

All of them would die.

When the asshuri arrived at the Gate of Beggars, Jawalhir was waiting for them. The crowd had dispersed, the body of Fingers Yusuf taken by more of Ma'mun's men, and the setting sun painted the stones of the Beggar's Gate red.

The asshuri marched at a quick trot, their armor jingling and their spears catching the light. The Hand of Afaz jog-trotted in front, his scarlet robes billowing round his legs. They'd been pushing themselves hard, Jawalhir could see. Sweat had made tracks through the dust on the asshuri's faces, and their skin was flushed. Only the Hand of Afaz seemed fresh—but that was not surprising, considering who he was.

As the column of men approached, she drew a deep breath to steady herself, then stepped out in front of them. She held up a hand. "Stop!"

For a moment, she thought the Hand of Afaz was simply going to run over her and trample her, but recognition flickered in his eyes and he held a hand over his head and shouted "Halt!"

The asshuri stopped, the men panting and peering at her. She heard some of them mutter, pointing and staring. The Hand walked forward, stopping two paces from her. This close, she had to look up to meet his gaze. He stood at least two feet taller than her—but he didn't look it; his thick shoulders and neck made him look shorter than he was. It was only now he was close she realized how big he was. He had thick-fingered hands, with large knuckles, and his face looked like it had been hacked out of mahogany with a blunt axe. He had a scar down his left cheek, which pulled his mouth on that side into a continual sneer.

"Sena," he said, then bowed, and despite his appearance, his tone was polite and cultured.

"Suf," she replied in turn, dipping her head.

"You are the woman I saw on the city road, one mile before the Fort of the Shah's Finger," he said.

"And you are the Hand—and the asshuri—I saw climbing the slope for Ibrahim's Ladder," she replied. Part of her was surprised at how calm she sounded, while another part—the part that had grown up on the lowest of the streets of the Lower City—was yelling at her that this was a Hand of Afaz, and that she should be running, now! Jawalhir took a deep breath, then continued. "I know what you are looking for."

The Hand's face showed nothing. "Really?"

"The man who was with me."

"Is that so?"

"He knows you're following him, but he doesn't know why." She swallowed. "But I do."

"I see," the Hand said. He made no move that Jawalhir could see, but the asshuri behind him fanned out to surround her. She did not look at them, keeping her gaze locked with the Hand's.

"Tell me where he is," the Hand said.

"You must promise me something first," Jawalhir said, forcing her voice to remain steady. "You must swear not to kill him."

"Sena, I am a Hand of Afaz. If I will it, I can have you flayed and your skin nailed above that gate." The Hand pointed to the Beggar's Gate behind him. "Now tell me where he is."

Jawalhir clenched her fists. "Is this how Afaz defends the weak? By threatening to flay women? If you will not swear, then by Eksh, you will get nothing from me!"

"You do not understand!" the Hand snapped. "This is no petty theft, no minor trespass. I must find what that man took, at any cost. Do you understand me?"

Jawalhir looked away and folded her arms.

"I will not ask you again, Sena," the Hand said. "You will tell me. I do not like inflicting pain, but I will not shrink from it to get what I need."

Jawalhir waited a moment, then let her shoulders slump. "Lakaf," she said. "He's gone up to Lakaf."

"Lakaf? Where?"

"I don't know," Jawalhir said. "He ..." She swallowed, and the tears pricking at her eyes were real. She waved a hand, her throat thick.

"I thank you, Sena," the Hand said. He dipped his head in a brief bow, then turned to his men. "Move! There's little time left!"

With a clatter of armor, the asshuri ran down the street, clearing a path through the crowd. The Hand followed, his red robes flapping as he ran.

Jawalhir blinked back tears, then she smiled to herself. Men. Idiots, the lot of them. The Hand and his asshuri would find nothing in Lakaf but fat merchants and their greedy wives. She knew where Baqir had gone. The Lower City, and Fat Ma'mun.

She arrived at Fat Ma'mun's as the twilight thickened into true night and the Sed moon rose above the rooftops. As Jawalhir walked down the last of the stairs that led from the Street of Persimmons to the Steps of Potters, she saw the first of Ma'mun's guards.

The man lay face down on the steps outside Ma'mun's kahwa shop, at the center of a spreading pool of blood that looked black in the moonlight.

Baqir stopped on the Street of Persimmons and looked down at the Steps of Potters below him. He rested his hands on the low stone wall that ran along the downslope side of the street and leaned over.

The Steps of Potters fell away beneath him, running down to the Street of Tanners at the very lowest point of the city. There, the city wall rose up, gray and thick. This was the lowest part of the Lower City, a place where only the desperate or the desperately poor would live. The houses crowded close together, sagging against one another as if tired. The whitewash was flaked, and in places the plaster had peeled clean away from the walls like diseased skin, exposing the brick bones of the building underneath.

Baqir's lip curled. No wonder Ma'mun held court here. The moneylender belonged in this vile sump, this stinking cesspool. His kahwa shop stood about two-thirds of the way down the Steps from Baqir. Four burly men lounged outside the entrance. A woman was walking toward them, one hand holding up her veil, the other balancing a basket on her head as she climbed the Steps. As the woman passed, the men called out crude suggestions to her. The woman just lifted her veil higher and hurried past them, refusing to meet their eyes.

Baqir's rage swelled inside him, thickening until he could feel it pushing at his skin. His temples throbbed with each beat of his heart, and his face felt suffused with blood.

His anger was directed equally at the men and the woman. The men for being what they were: crude, ill-fashioned, and low. They did not deserve to live. And the woman was no better. Baqir had seen her anger, and yet she let her fear master her. Well, and if she wanted to live as a rabbit, then she was not really living at all.

How could he let people like this continue to live? Something hot ran into his eye, stinging it. He blinked, then hot liquid burst from his nose and ran down into his mouth. Baqir wiped his eyes and nose, then looked down at his hand to see blood. Dimly, as if from a great distance, he heard cloth ripping. There was a constriction at his waist; it grew unbearable, then with another long rip of cloth tearing, it was gone.

He kicked the rags that had been his clothes from him, licked the blood from his hand, then leaped over the wall, landing heavily on the top step. The guards turned to look at him, their faces darkening.

As Baqir ran at them, hands outstretched and fingers crooked like claws, blood burst from his every orifice; he wept tears of blood, it streamed from his nose, it dripped from his groin and anus, it clotted in his throat.

But by then, Baqir no longer much cared.

Jawalhir ran down the Steps, stopping just above Ma'mun's dead guard. She leaned down, rolled the corpse over, then stood up quickly. Nausea rose in the back of her throat—not because of what had been done to the corpse, but because she knew who had done it.

Four more men emerged suddenly from an alley on the Steps below Ma'mun's kahwah shop. Steel blades gleamed in the light of the Sed moon. One pointed his sword at Jawalhir.

"This does not concern you, bitch!" he snarled. "You've seen nothing, now ... "

Whatever else he'd been about to say died in his throat. His voice trailed off and he stared at the doorway.

A hulking shadow stood just inside the doorway. The light of the Sed moon did nothing to illuminate the blackness within.

Then the figure stepped out into the moonlight, and even though Jawalhir had known in her bones who it was, she still felt horror grip her.

Baqir glared at her from eyes filled with blood. He stood taller than before, nearly seven feet high, Jawalhir guessed. His hair had fallen out, leaving only patchy strands over his scalp. Thick muscles were corded under his skin, rippling with every movement he made. And there was the blood. Everywhere, the blood. It dripped from his nose, trickled down from the corners of his eyes and out of his nose, even seeped in droplets from the pores of his skin like sweat. He was naked, and blood dripped from his fingers in a steady stream. It covered his hands and arms up to the elbows, as if he was wearing glistening red gloves. He held something in his left hand. It took Jawalhir a moment to realize it was Ma'mun's head, held by the hair.

The tableau stayed frozen for an instant, then Baqir snarled wordlessly and leaped forward. The four men raised their swords and charged. They were big men—and hard, but Baqir went through them like they were children armed with sticks. Blows thudded into flesh. Men shouted with pain. Bones snapped and splintered with loud cracks. And over it all: Baqir roaring with a sound like an enraged tiger.

In moments, it was all over. Baqir alone stood on the Steps; the men lay around him, battered and broken. A long gash on Baqir's belly seeped blood; it mingled with the steady drip from his groin and anus.

Jawalhir took a deep breath, reached for her knife. "Baqir!" she shouted.

He looked up at her, fury distorting his face even more than the mask of blood he wore. Fear twisted in Jawalhir's gut, but she forced herself to stay where she was. He was still Baqir, wasn't he? She hoped he was, but if he wasn't, then ...

Then she'd die. But she had to take the risk.

Baqir loped up the stairs toward her. Great slabs of muscle moved under his skin. The few lank strands of hair he had left swayed with the movement. His hands twitched, the fingers grasping and clutching at air.

When he stood in front of her, Jawalhir saw what he'd found. It was the first time she'd seen it, but she just knew that this was what had taken Baqir.

The amulet hung on a chain around Baqir's neck, a chain of gold that looked delicate in the moonlight. The amulet did not swing as Baqir moved, but lay still against his flesh, almost as if it were joined to Baqir's skin.

Basu, aid me now if ever you loved me, Jawalhir prayed.

"Baqir," she said, and looked for recognition in his eyes.

Something flickered there, deep in the bloody rage that now filled Baqir's gaze. His hands shivered, the fingers hooking into claws.

"Baqir, it's me, Jawalhir," she said.

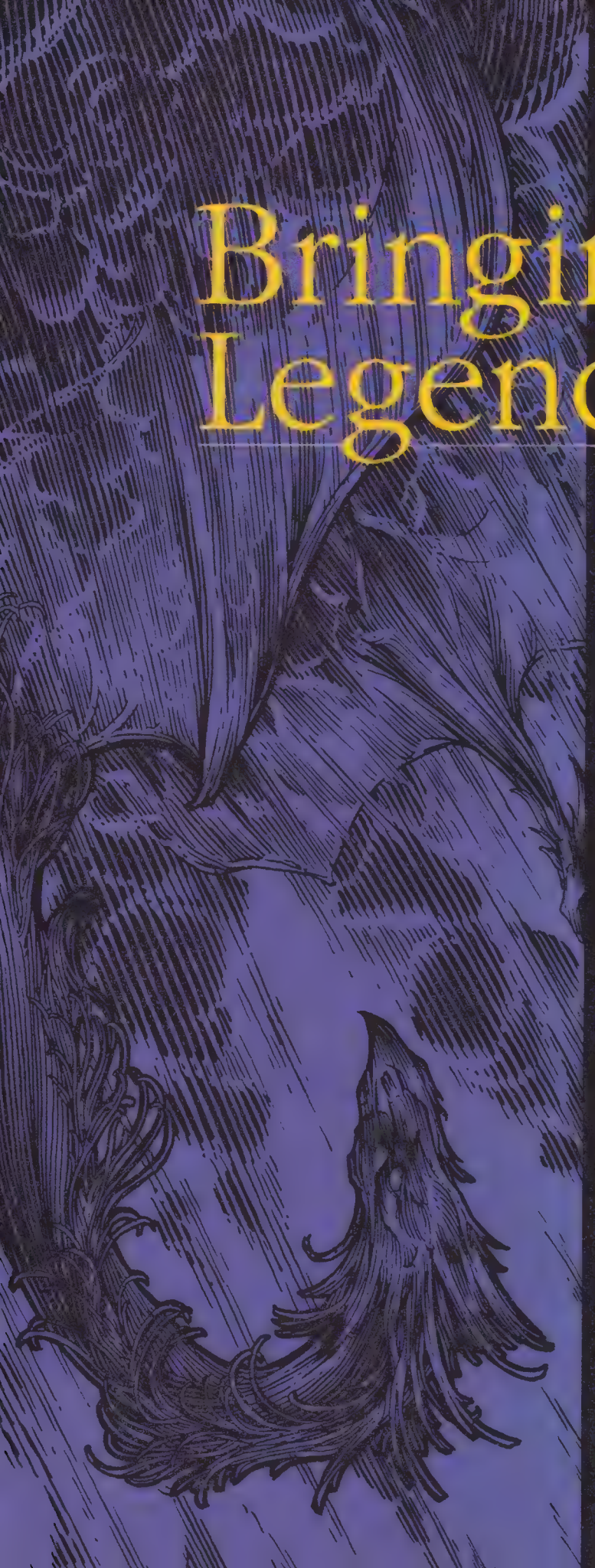
Baqir leaned toward her, sniffed. The smell of blood came off him in waves, mixed with a sharper, metallic scent.

"I will always love you," Jawalhir said, and reached for him. For a moment, the anger blurred away from Baqir's distorted features. But then Jawalhir's knife caught the light and it gleamed, and the anger and rage slammed back into Baqir's face. He snarled, his lips peeling back to reveal overlarge teeth crowding his mouth.

But Jawalhir was still faster than he. Her knife flickered up and around as she twisted away from Baqir's hands. The blade slipped under the gold chain, then up. The chain broke with a tink. The ends of the chain slid round Baqir's neck.

But the amulet did not fall.

Continued on page 90



Bringing Legend to Life

JAMES A. OWEN broke new ground as writer and illustrator of the IMAGINARIUM GEOGRAPHICA series.

By Mia Nutick

James A. Owen says that anyone can draw a dragon using just seven lines—everything after that is just detail. According to the old saw, though, "the devil is in the details"—and very few people tame that devil as well as Owen. His richly detailed drawings evoke myth and mystery, humor and heroism. He catches a realistic crow in flight as perfectly as he sketches a comical Disneyesque doorknob, and his fantastical, wondrous dragons gaze out of the page so vividly that the viewer expects them to suddenly turn their heads and begin to talk. Coupled with his deftly handled prose, his novels bring legend to life.

Discounting his earliest works, which began taking shape at the tender age of six, Owen's career in publishing started in 1986 with a self-published fantasy comic entitled *Pryderi Terra*. While *Pryderi Terra* garnered a less than stellar reaction from the comics world, his next venture, another fantasy comic, was much more successful. *Starchild*, a lushly illustrated amalgam of mysterious fairy tales, legends, and *Silas Marner*, published through his own company (originally called Taliesin, now Coppervale Press) and later through Image, ushered him firmly into the respectable company of such independent comic creators as Jeff Smith, Colleen Doran, and Dave Sim. Going on to publish the award-winning magazines *International Studio* and *Argosy* in the United States and authoring the popular *Mythworld* novels published in Germany by Festa, Owen has established an enviable international career as a writer and illustrator.

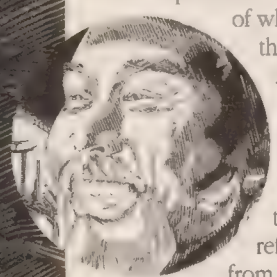
Most recently he has yet again broken new ground with *Here, There Be Dragons* (Simon & Schuster, 2006), *The Search for the Red Dragon* (Simon & Schuster, 2008), and the upcoming *The Indigo King*, books comprising the first three parts of *The Chronicles of the Imaginarium Geographica*. This highly acclaimed YA series, perhaps Owen's most exciting work to date, draws on many of the best loved fantasy stories of all time, blending bits of Jules Verne, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, James M. Barrie, and other legendary builders of fantastic worlds into a new and amazing setting: the Archipelago of Dreams, the lands beyond those we know, where living dragon ships move through a world of mythic lands guided by the *Imaginarium Geographica*, an "atlas of lost places."

Because James Owen is both a writer and an illustrator, he may never share the often disturbing and trepidatious experience of most authors: waiting on tenterhooks to see the cover illustrations chosen for one's novel by the publisher. While this is not a problem for graphic novelists, most writers do not have the input they'd like in choosing a cover, and more than a few have been dismayed to discover that the character pictured on the front of their book does not reflect the character that they've lovingly brought to life within the pages. Owen neatly sidesteps this issue; the cover art and illustrations within *The Chronicles of the Imaginarium Geographica* are his own creations.

Recently, I asked Owen about this and other aspects of his career:

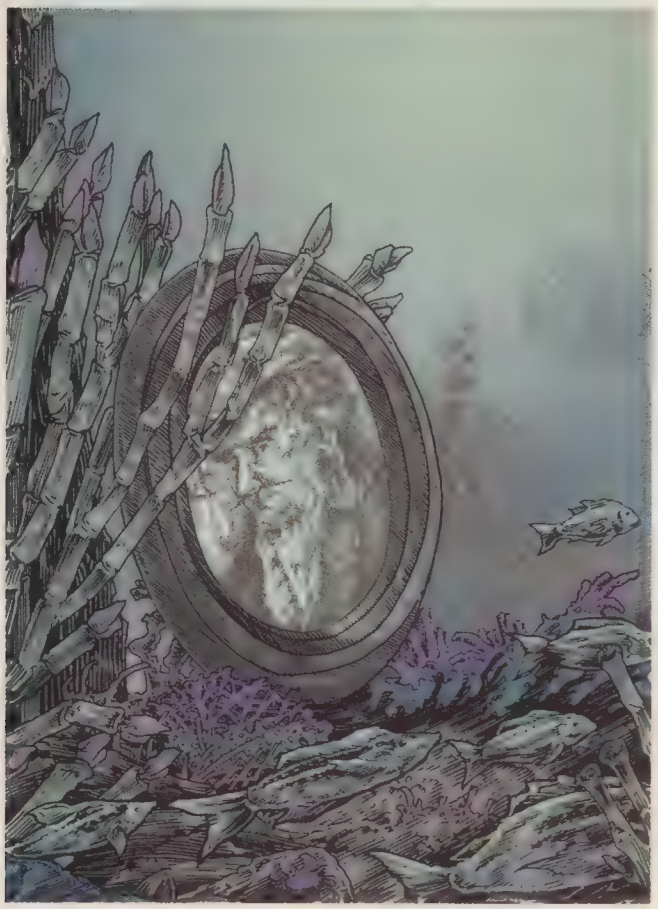
MN: You are one of a still small minority of people who both write and illustrate their own writing. Do you see yourself as an artist who writes, or a writer who illustrates? Are you more likely to have an idea for a picture and then create a story from that, or to write a piece and then create the illustrations? Or is it a simultaneous process?

JAO: That's an interesting question. I think I'm both a writer and artist in equal measures, and it's a concurrent process. I think that stems from my years doing the *Starchild* comics. I'd developed a process of thumb-nailing an entire issue based on a rough idea of where the story was going, and then refining it as I did the full-sized layouts. I do something similar with the *Imaginarium Geographica* novels—I do a one-page outline, breaking it down into chapters, then I do all the thumbnail illustrations based on the general plot, using the chapter titles (and margin notes) to establish the key story points. As I write the manuscript, the illustrations become altered slightly, and then refined as I finish writing. I can't really separate one from the other, although I have done just writing with things like the *Mythworld* novels—but even there, when I started a prequel called *Obscuro,* it took form as a graphic novel!"



Speaking of *Starchild,* you're bringing it back and finishing it up. Is that something you've always planned to do or something that the success of the *Imaginarium Geographica* books has inspired?

Both. There is a definite ending planned for the *Starchild:*



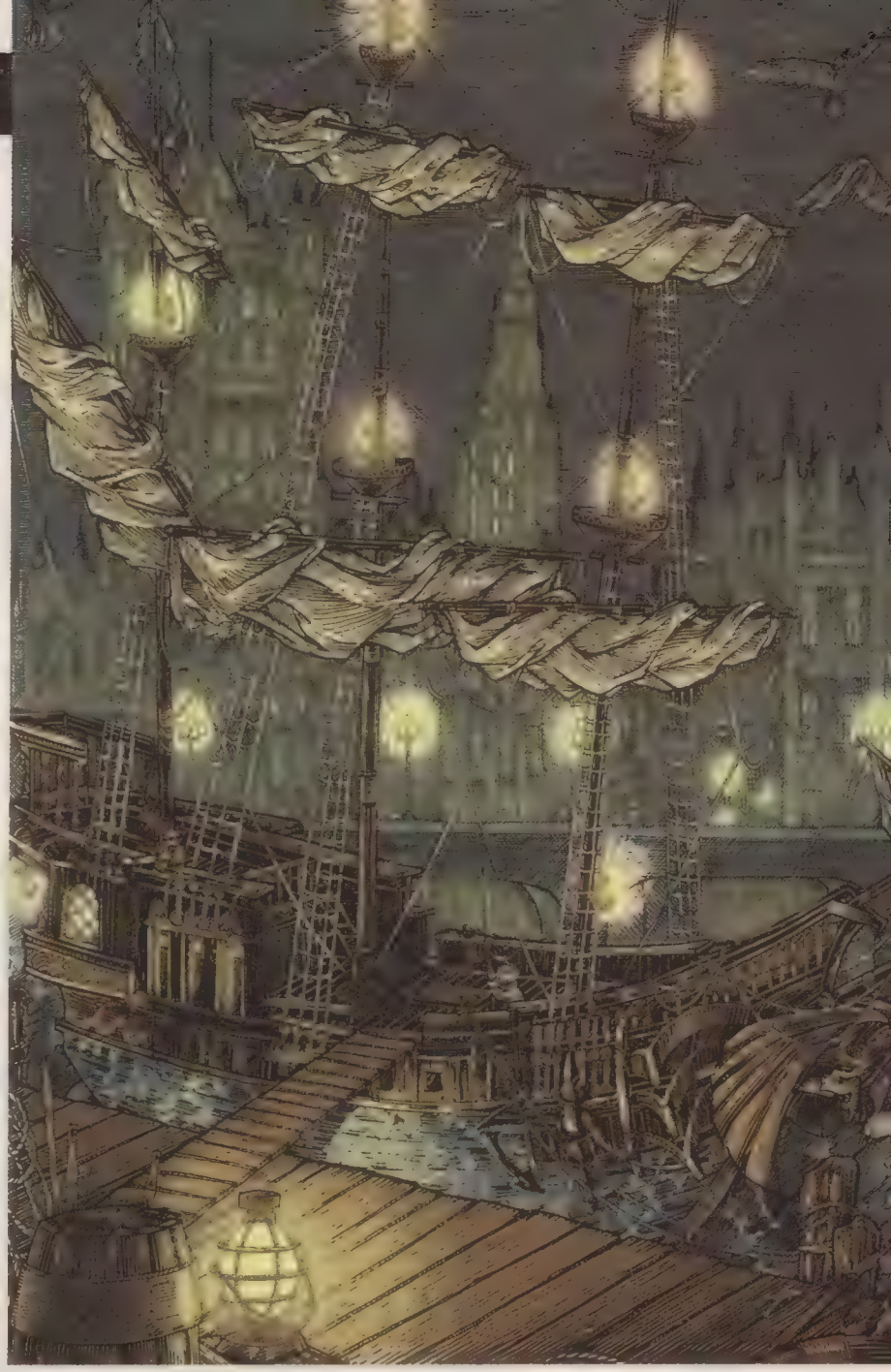
Mythopolis storyline that I just never managed to finish. The timeframe (1998 to about 2005) was a rough time for independent comics, and particularly so for non-superhero fantasy-centric material like *Starchild.*

However, at that same time, just over the ridge in YA book publishing, fantasy material was on the rise, and hasn't stopped. It was a prime opportunity for someone who had done nothing but write and illustrate fantasy material (in excess of 600 comic pages of *Starchild)* to create something new and roll into that market guns a' blazing. And that's where *The Chronicles of the Imaginarium Geographica* began.

As to resuming *Starchild,* the new series (titled *Starchild: Mythopolis II)* also features a plethora of other material, including a serialized possibly-prequel to *Here, There Be Dragons* called *The Thin Man and the Queen of Stars.* For *Starchild* fans, it's a way to introduce them to my current work; for *Imaginarium Geographica* fans, it's a way to introduce them to my previous work, and to give them a fix between novels; and for me, it's a way to bring the two audiences together, and hopefully draw the readership of the novels into the world of my comics."

A theme running through Owen's work, and indeed through his life, is "do the right thing and keep the faith, and everything will work out." At readings and school presentations, he gives vivid examples of this principle and how it has worked in his own life. He explains that "the secret of drawing consists of two things: (1) making lines on paper and (2) choosing where they go." As with his "seven lines" dictum, this sounds like a simple concept. But how does one make lines on paper and choose where they go without a hand to do it with?

James Owen found out in 1992 when he crushed the fingers of his drawing hand in an automobile accident. As he explains when he speaks to schoolchildren, he went through months of grueling physical therapy with one goal in mind: "I have to be able to hold a



pencil." In the meantime, he put his faith into action and asked another group of artists to illustrate his work. Guest contributors inked frames based on his concepts, and with such comic luminaries as Craig Hamilton, Dave Sim, and Will Eisner bringing his ideas to life, they produced *Starchild: Gatherum.*

He put his confidence in the universe into play again when, down to his last few dollars, he told a friend that all he needed to do was "write a best-selling novel and then sell the movie rights for millions of dollars." Immediately thereafter he sold *Here, There Be Dragons* to Simon & Schuster—and the movie rights to Warner Brothers where Dave Heyman plans to make the *Imaginarium Geographica* series into the next *Harry Potter*-style series of blockbuster films.

I asked Owen what, in addition to "keep the faith," his message is—what does he want to contribute to the field of literature, and of fantasy fiction in particular? His answer: "There's a line I've used more than once in my comics and stories: All stories are true—some of them just never happened. More to the point, all stories are also connected. Historical, mythological, fictional, fantastical ... all of them. And I delight in finding the connections, or finding holes in history, and filling them with plausible story. What I am trying to do personally with my work is trace the connections in ways that are fun, enlightening, and which will provide me with a good living.

"What I am trying to do professionally is provide as many opportunities as possible for people to say, 'Now, isn't THAT interesting?' Because if people are interested, if you can engage them in some way, draw their attention, involve them, then you can tell more stories. And stories are, after all, what bring us together as families, and communities, and cultures. Stories are the threads that connect us to the past and pull us into the future. And by finding the places where they connect, and revealing those connections to my readers, I can make those threads stronger … and have fun at the same time."

James A. Owen is indeed making the threads of story stronger through both his writing and his art, and we can only wait and watch for his next surprise. He can be found online at *www. heretherebedragons.net.* ❧

By Eric T. Baker

Ninja Gaiden II continues the love-hate affair players have with Team Ninja.

If you love a challenge and have very nimble fingers, Ninja Gaiden II *is the perfect game for you.*

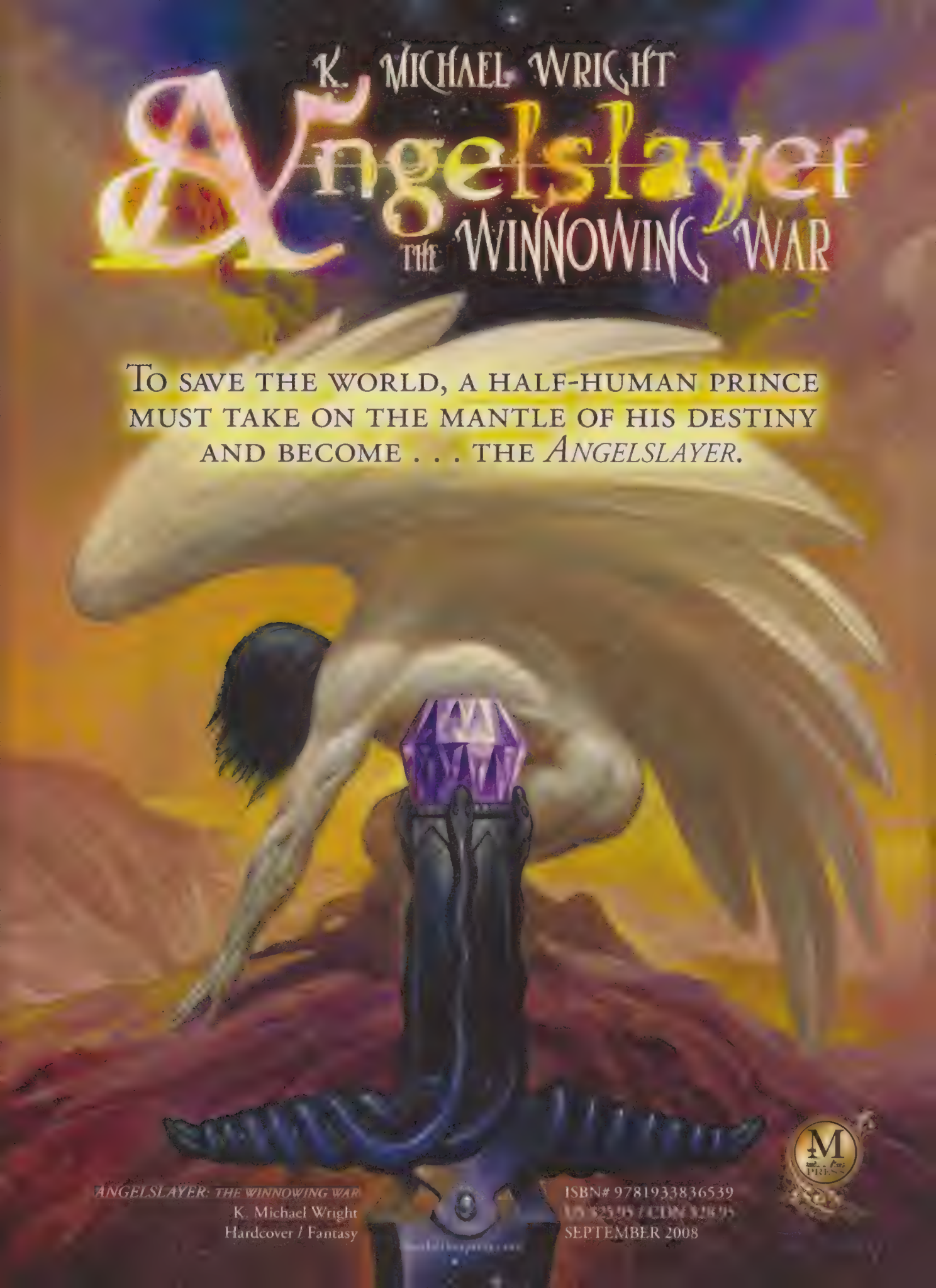
The love-hate affair that is playing games from Team Ninja continues in ***Ninja Gaiden II*** for the Xbox 360 from Tecmo. Team Ninja is the design house responsible for the *Dead or Alive* series of games as well as the *Ninja Gaiden* games. As designers they are dedicated to beautiful graphics, gorgeous cut scenes, and punishingly hard game play. Even in their volleyball games, which you might think would be a light-hearted romp, many of the challenges are impossible for all but the most gifted players. Those with slow fingers are better off looking for thrills elsewhere.

Avoiding Team Ninja games is hard, however, because they are so pretty. *NGII* shows it is another game in line with this tradition in its opening cinematic which introduces you to a future Tokyo and to Sonia, the buxom special agent who is going to be getting the game's hero, super ninja Ryu Hayabusa, into a lot of trouble. As with *Ninja Gaiden*, it isn't that the story the cut scene tells is so compelling that it sucks you into the game. It's that the movie looks so good, you want to play to get to the next one.

The game seems to give slower fingered players some hope in that it starts with two difficulty levels.

Finishing the game on the harder of the two unlocks a greater difficulty level, but the easier of the original two will be more than enough challenge for most players. Once the fighting starts, you will be immediately impressed by the variety and complexity of fighting moves you will be able to do with just three buttons and one trigger required. Players who have admired the complicated combos of the fighting games, but have been unable to execute them, will find that the *NGII* controls allow those great moves to be triggered almost automatically. In fact, once an enemy is wounded, just getting Hayabusa close to them and pressing Y results in a devastating finishing move.

The beauty of the graphics, the ease of the fighting moves, and the complete over-the-top limb-lopping bloodiness of the game are all promising signs, but all too soon you find that despite the increased number of save points and the auto heal that kicks in after each set piece fight, death is a frequent out-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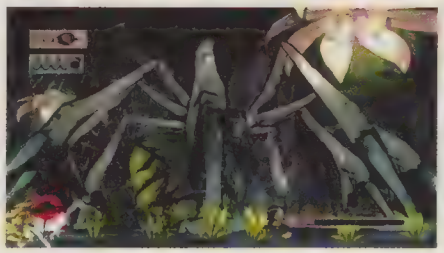


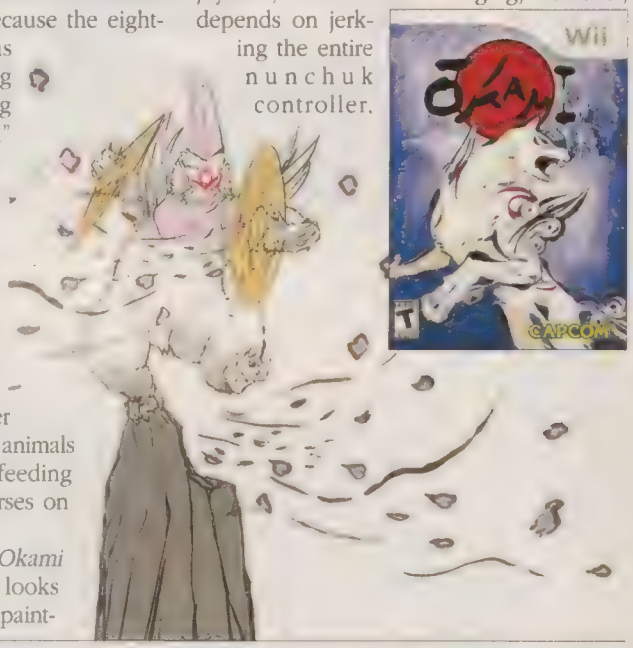
come. The enemies have combo moves of their own, they outnumber Hayabusa in every fight, and the camera is not always where it needs to be to let you see what you're fighting. *NGII* is a game that is lovable for many things, but it is also hateable for how much it demands of the player. For those who love challenge and know they have the fingers for it, *NGII* is a fantastic game.

A game that is just a beautiful in a completely different way is ***Okami*** for the Wii from Sega. This is a port of the largely overlooked PS2 game from 2006. There is no new content in this version, so players who have the PS2 game need not buy it again, but it does have improved resolution on the graphics, and the controls have been optimized for the Wii. In fact, bringing *Okami* to the Wii was a no brainer because the central mechanic of the game is drawing with a virtual brush, something that the Wii's controls are much more suited to than the PS2's were.

An action adventure game with some role-playing elements, you take the role of the Japanese Goddess, Amaterasu, who has been summoned to the Earth in the form of a white wolf. She's called forth because the eight-headed demon Orochi has escaped his century-long imprisonment and is laying waste to the land. "Ammy," along with her companion Issun, sets out to restore the land, regain her full powers, and then end the threat of the demon. It is the restoring part of the game this sets it apart from many games with similar plots. Ammy doesn't gain power from killing, but rather by earning praise from the animals and plants of the world, feeding them, and breaking the curses on them.

The most striking part of *Okami* is the graphics. The game looks like a Japanese watercolor painting, albeit a stylized one. Things don't have the detail of the actual paintings, but they have the design and "feel" of them. The marvel of watching a crippled tree restored to life and strength is on par (if very different) with watching a demon chopped to bloody pieces in *NGII*.

The controls for *Okami* reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the Wii hardware. Moving about the screen depends on the nunchuk joystick, so it is fine. Dodging, however, depends on jerking the entire nunchuk controller.



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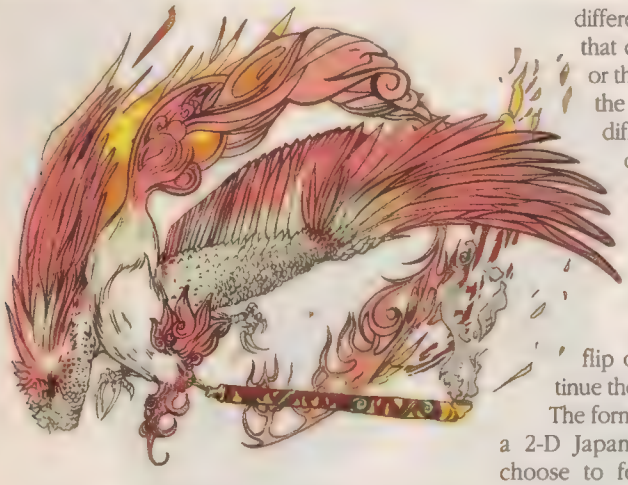


which puts characters at the mercy of the controller's erratic motion sensor. Luckily, the combat is easy enough that not much dodging is required. Painting, both in combat and in the story parts of the game, depends using the Wiimote's pointer function, which is its most accurate.

Beautiful without being glitchy, challenging without requiring supernatural hand-eye coordination, and entertaining without resorting to cursing and bloody violence, *Okami* is an excellent and engaging game for everyone in the family.

It isn't fair to compare ***Summon Night: Twin Age*** for the DS from Atlus to either *Okami* or *NGII*. There is simply a world of difference between the sort of game that can be programmed on the 360 or the Wii and what can be done for the DS. Gaming on the DS is just a different experience than playing on a console, but, of course, the advantage of the DS is that it can be played anywhere, not just in front of the TV in the family room. Doctors offices, soccer practices, family visits, and so on are all fair places to flip open a DS and continue the adventure of *SN:TA*.

The format of *SN:TA* is that of a 2-D Japanese RPG. You can choose to follow the game as either Aldo (the male, melee-based character) or Reiha (the female magic-based character). The game takes place in the magical world of Clardona which is ruled by spirits. The humans want to command the spirits; the Kascuza want to work with them. The game starts with spirits being corrupted; Aldo and Reiha set out to make sure their friends are okay and before you can say "Hero's Journey" they are off to save the world.

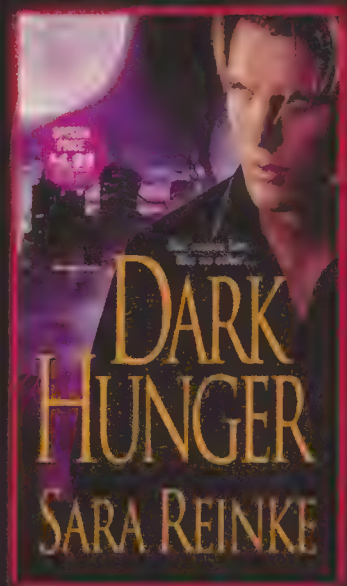
Unlike many JRPGs, *SN:TA*'s combat is not turn based. Instead, the characters have a base attack that they will launch automatically at whatever enemy you tap on. In addition, spells, skills, special attacks, and items can be placed in the hot trays on either side of the screen. These specials are then activated by tapping them and targeting them with the stylus. In the parts of the game where Aldo and Reiha are together, you can use another tap to switch back and forth between controlling them.

The story of *SN:TA* is fine for what it is, the combat is interesting if a little frenetic at times, and the graphics are good for the system that it is on, but the thing the game does better than most RPGs, particularly Japanese ones, and better than even other DS games, is that it lets you save the action at almost any point. This is essential when in the middle of a quest and the Jiffy Lube tech suddenly wants to talk about the car's air filter. There are two permanent save slots that can only be accessed at certain points and which the characters revert to the most recent of when they are killed, but there is also an instant save that can be used at nearly any time. The limit there is that it is erased as soon as the game is reloaded from it. This lets you stop almost any time, but it keeps you from using reload as a "cheat."

While not a "wow" of a game like *Okami*

Forget everything you know about vampires.

Tessa Noble-Davenant will do anything to protect her brother, Brandon, even if that means traveling across the country with Rene Morin. A cynical, brooding, yet startlingly sexy vampire, Rene seems to take pleasure in finding fault with Tessa's every move. Despite this, a sensual attraction begins to develop between the two, one to which neither can afford to succumb. Rene and Tessa are being followed—and a single misstep will put them at the mercy of forces more dark and powerful than they can ever imagine...



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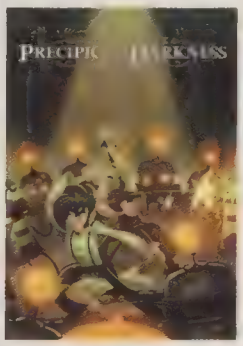
or *NGII, SN:TA* is easy to recommend to players who are looking for an RPG for their DS. Few games do as much with what the system allows and even fewer are as well suited to playing away from home.

Not as mobile, but by far the funniest of the games in this issue's column is ***Penny Arcade Adventures: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness*** from Hothead games for the PC, Mac, Unix, and Xbox 360. With its 2-D graphics, turn-based combat, leveling mechanics, and click-on-everything-to-find-items gameplay, *PAA* could easily be another Japanese RPG, but the humor, both its frequency and its style, makes it a distinctly Western production.

Set in the city of New Arcadia in 1922, the game has you create a somewhat customizable character before being plopped down on a suburban front yard. Then comes a narrator that starts the jokes and guides you through the trauma of having your game house crushed by a giant robot. In pursuit of the robot are Gabe and Tycho, who in real life are the creators of the *Penny Arcade* comic strip as well as being characters in it. In the game they are the founders of the Startling Developments Detective Agency. In short order your character has joined forces with them and the questing is on.

It is safe to say that players who like the *Penny Arcade* comic will like this game. There is certainly no shortage of jokes. For instance, whereas a game like *Final Fantasy* puts chests around for the players to pop open and find items they need for the game, *PAA* puts trash cans around for the player to



kick over and get a funny description ... and occasionally an item they can use in the game. And the whole premise, story, and characters of the game are just silly. In a good way. Even players who don't read the comic, but can see the comic possibilities in battling clowns in the street with a rake while being almost aided by the world's laziest cat, will enjoy working their way through the game.

Finishing up is the easiest game of column, ***Kung Fu Panda*** from Activision for the PC, DS, Wii, PS2 & 3, and Xbox 360. Basically, if there is a game system in the house, there is a version of this game to play on it. And if there are people in the house, they will be able to play the game with relative ease. In many ways, *KFP* is the same sort of game as *NGII*, but they are aimed at completely different audiences. *NGII* is for a hard-core gaming crowd; *KFP* is for people who are either relatively young or are first-time gamers or both.

A couple of things keep this game simple. One is the level design. Whereas *NGII* has battlegrounds that contain different heights and obstacles that must be managed while the enemies swirl around Hayabusa, *KFP* has much simpler battlegrounds and the enemies are much less aggressive about coming at Po. The fighting itself is similar with just three buttons used to create simple combos, but the *KFP* player has more time to punch them out. On the occasions when the enemies do swarm Po, it is usually a quicktime event that you can beat just by pushing one button over and over.

So *KFP* has graphics that are crisp enough to remind players of the movie. It has sound-alike actors who do a good job with the dialogue. It has the same plot as the movie with some extra scenes thrown in to expand the length. It is simple, but has some depth (side quests and power leveling) that players who are interested can follow. For a movie game it is surprisingly entertaining and complete. The only thing to be said against it is that it is short for video game: only 11 levels that each go pretty quickly if you doesn't follow the side quests. It is a good value as a renter, but probably only huge fans of the movie will need to own it. ❧

under the skin

Continued from page 57

without his skin my father cannot hide from hunters. Without it, he is still strong, but he is vulnerable.

"Anna, what is it? Do you need help?"

"Yes," I say. "I need matches. Do you have any matches?"

27. "... and authorities say the animal was found wandering the streets this morning, Robin, when that team of Alaskan bear hunters finally completed the operation. It took seventeen shots with a large-bore rifle to knock it down, they tell me, Robin, and even then it managed to injure three of them before ..."

28. I moved into Linda Olansky's house a month ago, since my father disappeared—twenty-eight days, to be exact; I prefer precision, it's important in these things. My new bedroom is lined with bookshelves, like my old one, but it also has a mural on the walls of a meadow and a sun peeking its rosy face over a hilltop.

Linda Olansky is petitioning the court to be my official guardian, since no other relatives can be found. She asked me if I knew where my father had gone, and I said nothing. She just nodded. Someday she will ask again, and maybe I will tell her the truth.

So far she has not mentioned that night we burned the human skin, the night I danced in terror next to her as Linda Olansky put the bag that held my father's disguise in her fireplace and doused it with lighter fluid, snapped a kitchen match to life, and tossed it in.

The bag caught and flared and the smoke fled up the chimney. I thought it would smell like burning meat, but it didn't. It didn't smell like anything.

Afterward, I swept the ashes out and with a clink something fell into Linda Olansky's dustpan: a wedding band.

Now I lie in my new bed in the dark, waiting for the swollen moon to show in my window, and in my hand I turn his wedding ring, wondering. My mother gave it to him. He kept it. Did it make him feel not so alone? But he was alone.

I feel the slow stirring inside my skin. Maybe this is what Rimbaud felt. The words in the blood, bursting him open, forcing themselves out. But they didn't. He lived the rest of his days traveling the world. Free.

It wants me to let it out. I will not. The words are inside me too, not just the wolf.

I will count out the minutes until dawn. There are many minutes in an hour, but they can be counted. Then again. One. Two. Three.

Fifty-nine, sixty. One. Two. Three.

Do not turn thy face from the confession of the most pitiful of thy handmaidens. I am lost. I'm impure.

The night is long, but it ends. ❧

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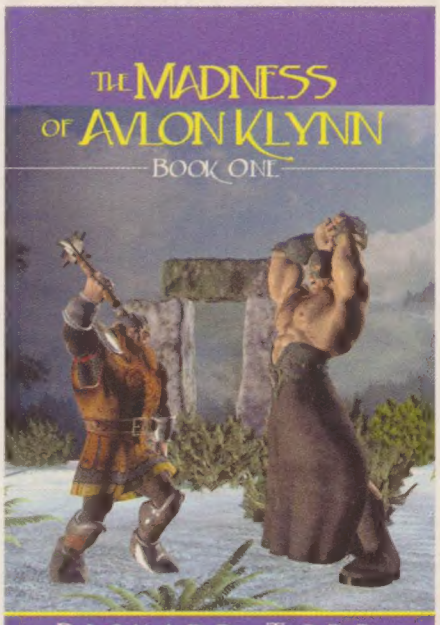

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claw unseen

Continued from page 77

Baqir grabbed for her. Desperate now, Jawalhir stepped forward. Baqir's hand gripped her shoulder, squeezed. Pain shot out as he crushed her muscle.

Jawalhir's knife flashed up, slipped into Baqir's skin, through into the muscle. He roared, and blood sprayed from his mouth. Jawalhir felt something snap in her shoulder. Bone grated. Agony flashed into life. Jawalhir scraped the knife along Baqir's chest, cutting through muscle and lifting the flesh away like a man fillets a fish, and then her knife was free and a thin wedge of flesh spun into the night. Blood sprang from the wound at Baqir's chest and he gasped with a sound like a drowning man whose head has broken the surface.

The sliver of flesh hit the Steps with a solid clunk of metal as the amulet hit the stone.

Baqir drew another great shuddering breath, then slumped forward. Jawalhir caught him, staggered under his weight. Slowly, she lowered his body to the Steps. Baqir lay shivering, tremors and spasms running through his body. But when he looked at her, she saw the true Baqir in his eyes, her Baqir.

The Hand was waiting for her at the Gate of Beggars. He stood alone, his arms folded in the sleeves of his scarlet robe. Jawalhir's heart sank. She thought of reining in the mule and working her way downslope to the Lower Gate, but the Hand caught her eye and gave a tiny shake of his head.

Jawalhir knew she couldn't flee. And as for fighting the Hand ... might as well dream of flying over the walls in the silver chariot of Kavus. Despair settled on her shoulders, its weight making them sag.

When she reached the Hand, he took the reins of the mule and stroked the back of its neck.

"Sena," he said, and nodded.

She nodded. "Suf," she said, her throat dry.

"My name is Farid i Hudhayfah," the Hand said.

Jawalhir said nothing. Whatever game this Hand was playing, she wanted none of it.

"A man was killed last night," Farid said. "A moneylender named Fat Ma'mun, owner of a kahwa shop on the Steps of Potters. His head had been ripped from his body. Whoever the killer was, he had immense strength. The killer vanished." Farid clicked his fingers. "Like that."

"Moneylenders are pigs, and children of pigs," Jawalhir spat. "I have no doubt this Fat Ma'mun deserved his death."

"Certainly." Farid smiled very briefly. "But his killer must be found. A man strong enough to tear other men limb from limb, a man filled with so much rage he slew fourteen men in one night—such a man must be stopped. Don't you agree? Such a man might try to flee the scene of his bloody crime. He could, for example, hide in the back of a wagon while a woman—perhaps his lover—drove the wagon out of one of the city gates. Perhaps even this gate."

"You won't find him," Jawalhir said.

Farid raised an eyebrow.

"He's gone," Jawalhir said, maintaining eye contact with Farid.

Pulling his arms free of his sleeves, Farid held up a length of broken chain with delicate gold links. "I know he's gone," Farid said. "But will he return? That is what I wish to know. What I must know."

Jawalhir pulled her knife from its sheath, then used the tip of the blade to flick a cloth-wrapped package from the bench beside her. It fell to the stone with a heavy thump of metal.

Farid glanced at the package, his face expressionless, then looked back at her. "Did you touch it?"

"No."

He stared at her, his gaze searching, then he nodded. "Very well."

Jawalhir sheathed her knife, then picked up the reins. She hesitated for a moment, then looked back at the Hand. She had to know.

"Why?" Jawalhir asked.

"Why?" Farid raised an eyebrow. "Why what?"

"Why this?" Jawalhir jerked her chin at the wagon behind her. "Why let us go?"

Farid folded his arms in his sleeves once more. "Afaz is Divine Justice, Sena. Through me, the God works his will on the world. I bring justice. I have the power of the axe and the lash. You know this."

Jawalhir's mouth was dry. The Hand's eyes were cold.

"But the greatest part of Justice, Sena, is mercy," Farid continued. "Justice without mercy is no justice at all, but merely law, and human. Justice is Divine, and merciful. If a man stabs another, is it justice then to arrest the knife?"

Jawalhir exhaled slowly as tension left her. Then she asked, "What was it?"

Farid said nothing. He stepped back to the side of the road, clearing her passage though the Gate of Beggars.

Taking the unspoken order, Jawalhir clicked her tongue and flicked the reins. The mule started forward. The wagon creaked and jounced under the Gate of Beggars and out onto the city road. The sun was rising behind her, and the western slope ahead was lit with pink and yellow light, painting the tombs of the necropolis warm colors and making the white marble of the tombs glow.

When she reached the rise in the road, she looked back over her shoulder, over the back of the wagon where Baqir lay in his nest among the stacked crates, toward the city behind her.

The dawn light flared from the roofs of the city as it sprawled up the slope, but thick shadows still clung to the Gate of Beggars, where the Hand stood motionless, staring down at something near his feet. ❧

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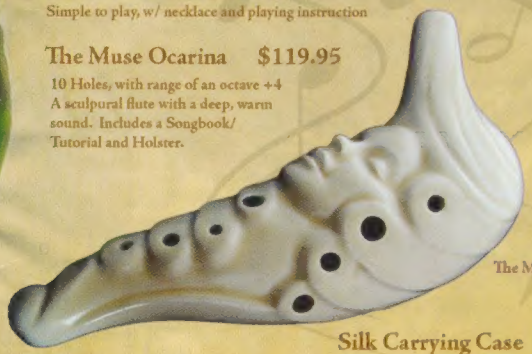
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